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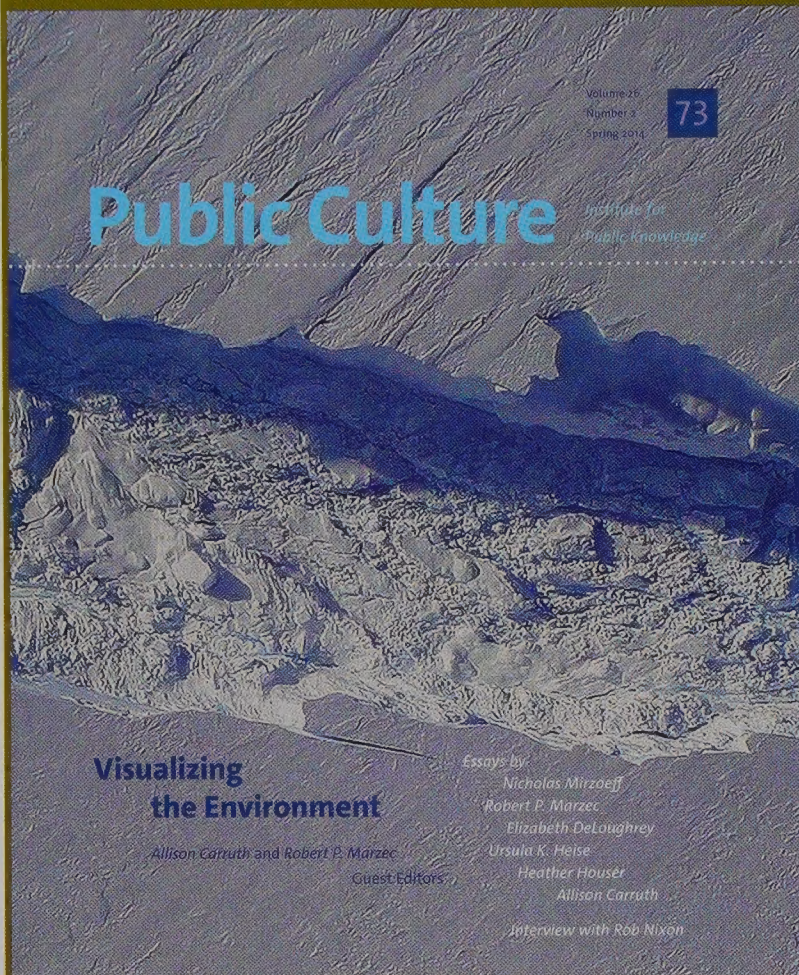
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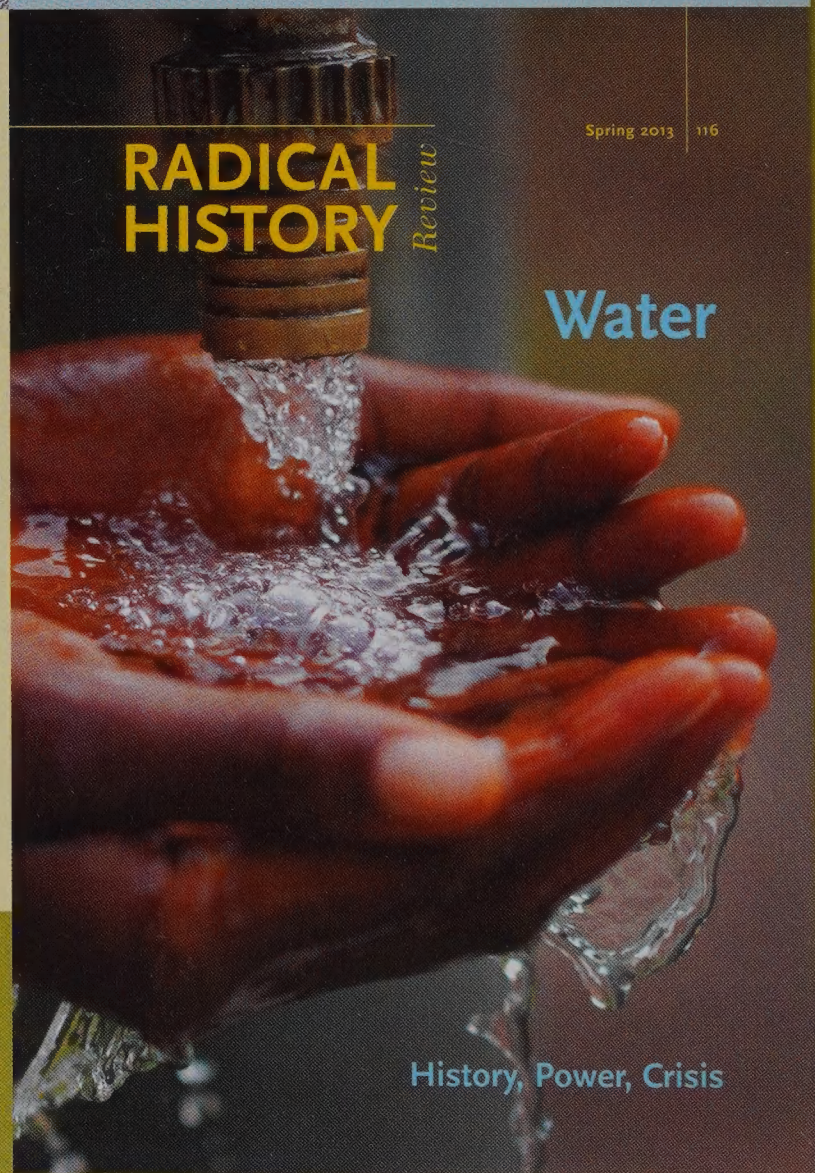
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# LETTERS

## Coach Thyself

I found it funny and appropriate that many life-coaching programs discussed by Genevieve Smith were founded by salesmen and accountants ["50,000 Life Coaches Can't Be Wrong," Report, May]. It's no surprise the programs sound like baloney; they are designed solely to encourage their clients to be in denial about the realities of their lives. With no actual life-changing tools on offer, a coach simply allows her client to see herself in whatever life the client wishes, forcing the client to consume more and more coaching in order to prolong and elaborate on the delusion shared by coach and client. A perfect self-perpetuating system.

Especially apt was Smith's coining of the phrase "emotional pyramid scheme" to describe the way clients of life coaches often become life coaches themselves. But what other options are there? Perhaps it's fairest to view this industry as a symptom of the broader failures of our economy.

Matthew Zorich  
Alliance, Ohio

Smith portrayed inaccurately both the Coaches Training Institute

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and the life-coaching industry generally, taking an excessively critical attitude toward a subject that is quite complex. If Smith had suspended her cynicism during the coaching course she attended, she could have learned a number of valuable things—how to really listen, ask more powerful questions that elicit more authentic responses, explore a wide range of human experience, feel and show compassion, and expand curiosity. I would think a writer, just as much as a life coach, needs these sorts of skills.

Sadly, they were not on display in her essay. Smith mocked coaches, but many of us do important work. We help survivors of rape, political activists, Hurricane Katrina volunteers, parents, and regular people making their way through life. I stand by what my son calls my "noble profession."

Amy Logan  
San Francisco

After thirty years in the industry, I must say that I find Smith's conclusion that coaching amounts to an expensive friendship entirely inaccurate. In reality, precisely because a preexisting friendship can easily muddy a coaching relationship, it is inadvisable for coaches to work with close friends and loved ones. The goal, finally, is to relate to others in a positive and fulfilling manner. A good coaching relationship, devoid of agenda or bias, pro-



vides a grounded structure for the client's ongoing personal and professional development.

James Flaherty  
San Francisco

## Against the Grain

What a classic example of the elephant in the room. In Lisa M. Hamilton's "The Quinoa Quarrel" [Letter from Bolivia, May], there is hardly any mention at all of Monsanto; the chemical giant's name appears only in reference to a scientist who used to work there and a geneticist's saying he would share seed with the company. I found it odd that Hamilton failed to consider what would happen if a company like Monsanto gained ownership of a particular variety of quinoa. For starters, the company would likely genetically modify the crop to be resistant to herbicides and prohibit farmers from collecting seed. It was disappointing that Hamilton missed this opportunity to remind readers of the harm inflicted on all of us by agribusiness.

Naomi Rachel  
Boulder, Colo.

I trust I'm not the only one noting the contrast between Hamilton's article and Daniel Smith's review of *The Sixth Extinction*, by Elizabeth Kolbert ["Consume, Screw, Kill," May]. While Hamilton suggests that we need an international effort to develop hybrid crops to feed our growing population in an era of climate change, Smith points out that it is precisely this human tendency, intentional or otherwise, to intermix species from around the globe that is leading us rapidly to the next great period of extinction! The conclusion would seem to be that our salvation will come through more of the very same behavior we need saving from. Perhaps we just can't do things any other way. A species that runs as we do may be destined to burn out fast.

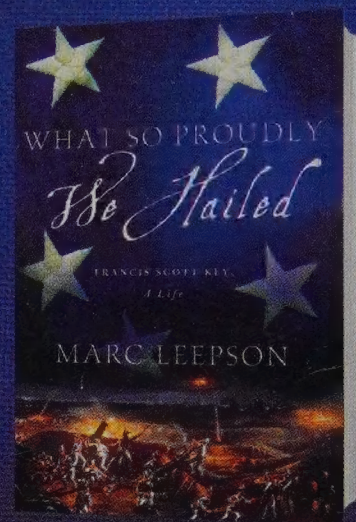
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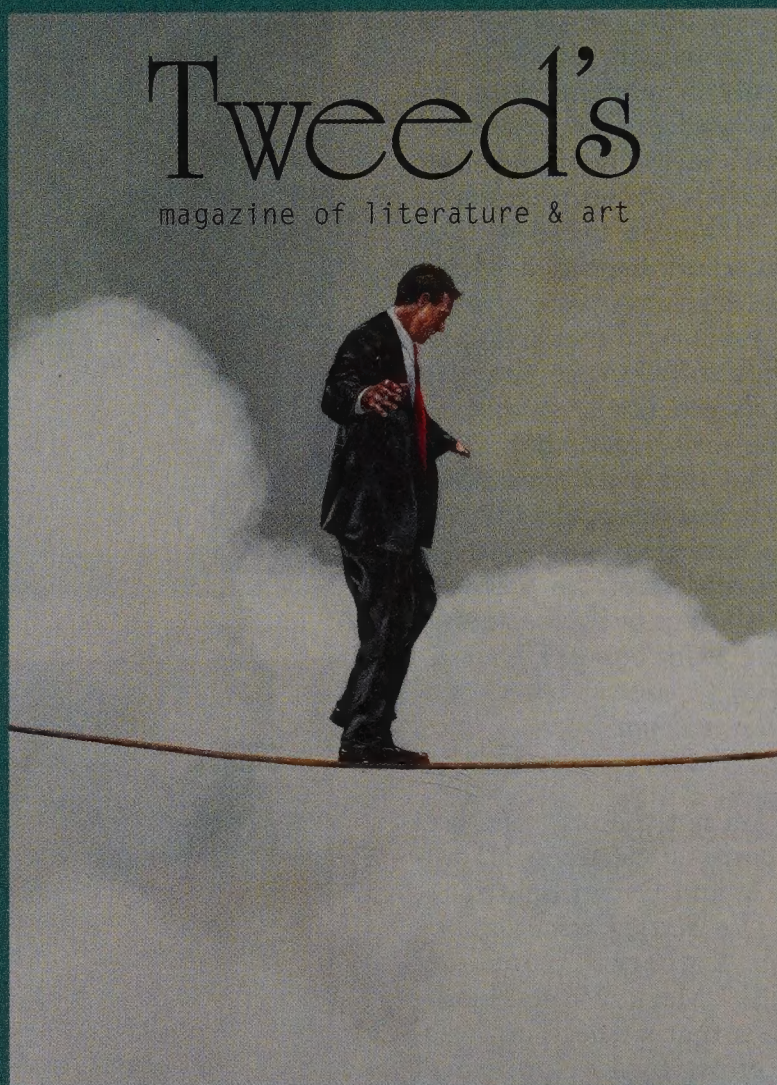
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# EASY CHAIR

Angle to Montgomery  
*By Christopher Cox*

Justin Barkley and I met as freshmen in college. He was the soft-spoken kid with an Alabama accent who lived down the hall. His roommates were all jocks of one type or another, so he spent a lot of time with the misfits in my suite that first year. We fell out of touch after graduation, though I heard about the big milestones: marriage; law school; kids one, two, and three. Now here he was in my inbox, the sender of a mass email to a blind-copied list: "I wanted you to be among the first to know that, after much prayer and careful deliberation, I have decided to run for a seat in the state legislature."

Spencer Bachus, the eleven-term congressman from Birmingham, Alabama, was retiring; Paul DeMarco, the state representative from Justin's district, was running to replace him; and Justin was running in the Republican primary for DeMarco's open seat. There was an ask in Justin's email, but it was subtle—a link to contribute to the campaign "if you're so inclined."

A survey of young Americans conducted earlier this year found that only 7 percent disagree with the statement "Elected officials seem to be motivated by selfish reasons." About the

same percentage think that elected officials share their priorities. Meanwhile, things are looking a bit sunnier for the current U.S. Congress—their disapproval rating is down to 83 percent, from a high of 86 percent last November.

These numbers have no apparent effect on our nation's politicians, who are a separate species of American, greedier, vainer, almost inhuman in their willingness to debase themselves while striving for personal glory. As far as I knew, Justin had none of these traits. The question, then, was unavoidable: Was my friend secretly born a monster, or was he about to be made one? Many of the great villains of science fiction and fantasy are humans so disfigured by malevolence that they are no longer recognizable. Perhaps mild-mannered Justin was actually a Tom Riddle, an Anakin Skywalker, a Harvey Dent. If so, I was determined to stop the transformation before it happened (or, failing that, watch it take place).

Justin had hired a consultant, who had sent out a "Media Alert." To "raise awareness of his campaign," the candidate would be biking across District 46, stopping to meet voters along

the way. The most important information you want voters to be aware of when you're running for state legislature, it turns out, is what district they're in; a bike tour tracing the boundaries was a simple way to get that message across.

The Alert invited the press to "schedule interviews before, during or after" the tour, but when I arrived at a park in the Birmingham suburb of Homewood on my bike, I was the only reporter there. I introduced myself to Justin's campaign coordinator, Jimmy Sapp, and to Tyler Pruett, who worked for the consultant. They did a good job of pretending it wasn't at all unusual that a New York-based magazine had sent someone to cover the day's events. Pruett told me the campaign had heard from a few news organizations after the press release went out, but interest had evaporated once the outlets learned that the bikes in question wouldn't be Harleys.

It was the week before Easter, a warm and sunny Saturday, and the Greater Birmingham Young Republicans were hosting an egg hunt in the park. Justin arrived after the hunt was over, so he chatted with the four or five young Republicans of voting age still around and ate potato salad. He



greeted me awkwardly; I don't think he was sure whether to treat me as a reporter or as an old college buddy. Sapp suggested that the candidate grab a toddler: "We may need a you-holding-a-baby shot."

The small turnout in the park worried me, so I asked Justin whether he would run again if he lost in the primary. His answer was disarming: "Depends on how good a job the winner does." The front-runner was a man named David Faulkner, who was in the lead mainly because of the name recognition he'd earned running an unsuccessful campaign for a local judgeship in 2012. Another candidate, Steve French, was a former state senator who'd lost his seat to a Tea Party candidate in 2010. He and Justin were about tied in the polls.

After a few minutes another contender for the seat, Pamela Blackmore-Jenkins, arrived. She was the only black candidate in the Republican primary, and the only woman. Polls put her in a distant fourth. She introduced herself to the young Republicans, who took her hand warily.

I turned to see Justin getting back on his bike. It looked a bit like he was being chased out of the park by Blackmore-Jenkins, as if merely being near such a marginal candidate might compromise his stature. (Justin admitted that losing to her was his biggest fear: "I'd just have to crawl into a hole and die if I came in fourth.") Sapp told me he had seen Blackmore-Jenkins knocking on every door in one of the district's neighborhoods a few weeks earlier. This was a sign that her campaign hadn't invested in a list of likely Republican voters, he whispered, his voice tinged with both pity and delight.

Car after car passed Justin, some of their drivers honking in anger as they steered around him. At our next stop, at a strip mall a mile or so away, I joked that he should make installing bike lanes his first order of business in Montgomery, but he didn't laugh. There were some people eating lunch outside, so Justin went table to table, interrupting their meals to press flyers into their hands and ask whether they lived in the district (most did not).

I grabbed a flyer and read highlights from Justin's life. Married with kids. Birmingham native. High school valedictorian. Churchgoer. First in his family to go to college. (He listed Harvard and the University of Alabama's law school on the same line, the latter perhaps apologizing for the former.) "First run for public office; not a career politician." (I decided not to tell him that the semicolon might cost him a few votes.) One young couple tried to refuse the flyer but eventually relented. A few seconds later they slipped it into a trash can along with the remains of their lunch. The only way to tell that Justin was meeting potential voters rather than, say, handing out lunch menus was the crowd of advisers surrounding him, typing furiously on their phones. It looked demeaning, and he wasn't even earning minimum wage doing it.

Campaigning door-to-door, Justin said, wasn't much different. Voters don't want to have a conversation. "A huge chunk is just educating people what the race is, what district it is, when the election is." His most successful lines are the one about how he's never run for office before, and what he calls "a little bit of regionalism": he plays up the fact that he lives in Homewood while Faulkner and French live in Mountain Brook, the most upscale neighborhood in the district.

If he won, Justin told me, his plan was to spend two terms in Montgomery. That way he would only be forty-two by the time he finished: "I would still have prime productive earning years to try to make up for serving in the legislature." In Alabama, representatives are paid a salary pegged to the state median income of \$50,000 a year—not bad! But he could definitely make more as a lawyer. Plus the hours are bad, and he'd have to commute an hour and a half to and from Montgomery. He might cash in on his political connections once he returned to private practice, but as long cons go, his was a few notches below nefarious.

Later I tried to press Justin on all of it—not just the money but the humiliations of the race, the low esteem in which his fellow citizens held him, the unlikelihood that he could ac-

complish anything even if he made it to Montgomery. The most he would admit was that he needed to "get the political bug out of my system."

We left the strip mall and began the first of a series of steep climbs. On a hill on the way to Hoover, the suburb where Justin grew up, the candidate stopped to talk to a woman working a hedge clipper. It was not immediately clear whether he was resting or canvassing, but Justin later said she'd promised him her vote. At the top of the next hill, we stopped at a deli and I heard the clerk compliment a customer on his handgun and matching clip holster—a new open-carry law had recently passed in the state. This exchange was the closest I'd come to seeing any policy discussed that day.

On one of the final descents of the day, Justin got a flat. We were in an eerie subdivision called the Preserve, a planned community meant to resemble a small town, and we pulled up to the side of the fake village green and took off the tire to investigate. If this were a *New York Times* story, this is where I'd write, "A reporter got off his bike and gave it to the candidate." I regret sacrificing my journalistic integrity, but it seemed cruel not to lend a hand.

Justin made it another mile on the unwieldy mountain bike I'd brought along before it, too, got a flat. I assured him I wouldn't treat this twin strike of bad luck metaphorically.

In any case, his staff had a backup bike ready for the final quarter mile to Hoover High School, Justin's alma mater and his tour's finish line. Since there was no one waiting there, the staffer working the video camera asked Justin to restage his approach. After he pulled up to the Hoover High sign a second time, he delivered an impromptu-seeming speech encouraging viewers of the video to find him on Facebook and Twitter. He spoke well off-the-cuff, though I noticed that his voice dropped a half octave when he addressed the camera. He did a second take of the speech, this time without the prompting of his staff.

The campaign's goals were modest: they wanted 3,500 of the ex-



pected 10,000 votes that would be cast in the primary. That would probably be enough to force a runoff, at which point "regionalism" really could make a difference—there were more voters from Homewood and Hoover combined than from Mountain Brook. They were asking their friends to mail campaign postcards to their Christmas-card lists, and Justin was attending as many Rotary and Kiwanis Club meetings as he could.

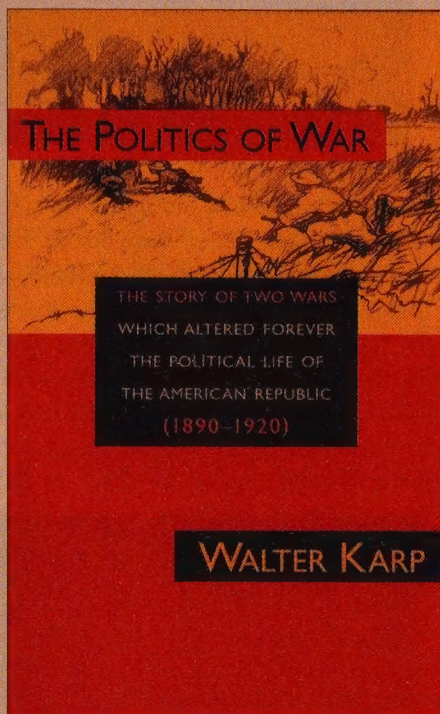
Paul DeMarco's run for Congress seemed to be occurring in a different universe. His number-one goal, he said, was to repeal Obamacare. He had raised more than \$850,000 by mid-April, and one of his opponents, Will Brooke, was only \$100,000 behind him. *Roll Call* had named it "the most moneyed House primary in the South." In May, Brooke made national news when the conservative radio host Laura Ingraham attacked him for failing to respond fast enough to a questionnaire from an anti-immigration group.

Justin's bike tour began to look dignified by comparison. His campaign wasn't free of the worries of higher-stakes races—when I asked him what he liked least about running for office he named four things, and all of them were money—but he was unfailingly upbeat about our day spent biking the district. His inspiration for the stunt, he said, had come from a state senator known as Walking Wendell Mitchell, who died in 2012. Mitchell was unabashed about getting government funding for projects in his district—an aim that was clearly tied to the amount of time he spent walking from door to door. It may be humbling to shake hands with the people you're meant to serve, I realized, but it's not humiliating. Hustling to please Laura Ingraham, however—that was truly demeaning.

The good news for Justin is that, whatever turns someone like him into a political grotesque, it doesn't happen at the state level. When he trades his bicycle for a Harley, though, and the strip mall for the National Mall, we'll want to keep an eye on him. To his and our misfortune, not all politics is local. ■

# Walter Karp

A contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine* for eleven years before his death, Walter Karp was a journalist and political historian whose incisive commentary on government evokes a fierce love of democracy.



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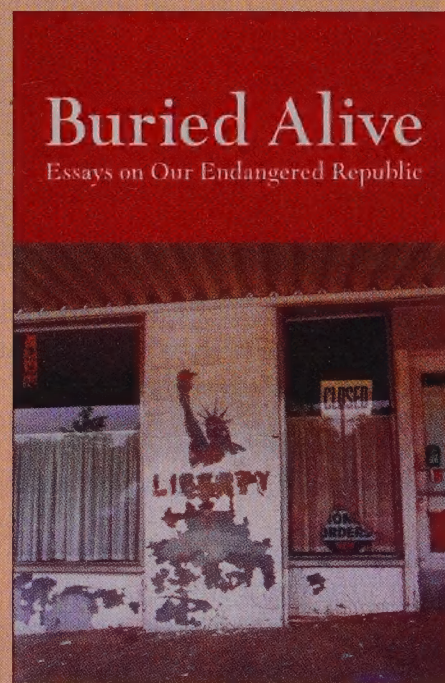
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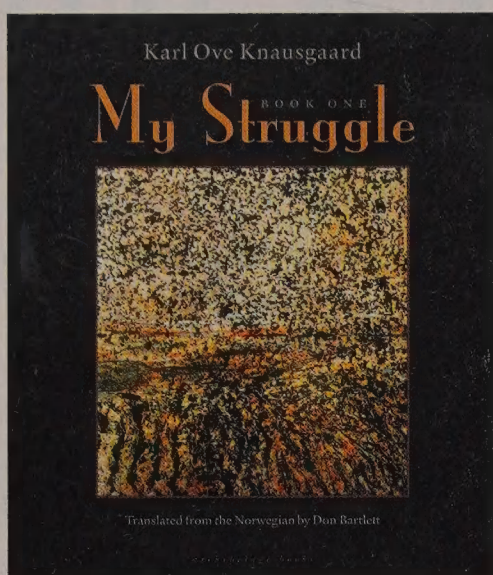
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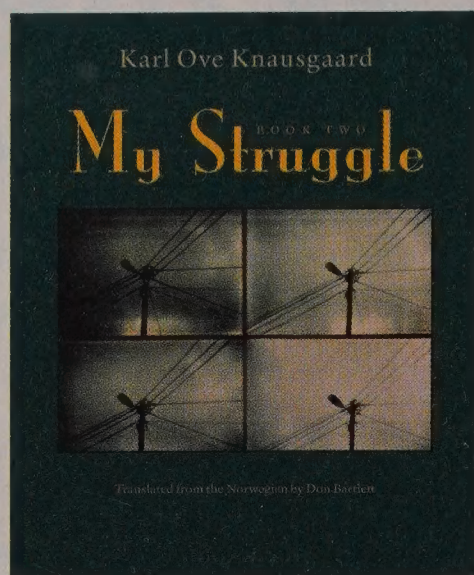


"KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD IS IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A GLOBAL SUPERSTAR." —THE ECONOMIST



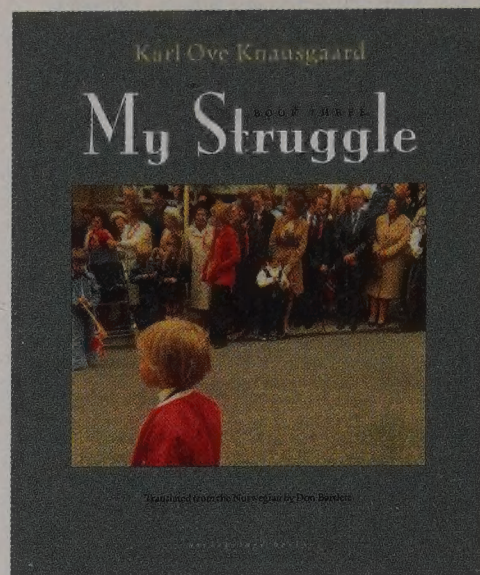
Karl Ove Knausgaard. *My Struggle*. It's unbelievable. I just read 200 pages of it and I need the next volume like crack.

ZADIE SMITH



Knausgaard pushed himself to do something that hadn't quite been done before. He broke the sound barrier of the autobiographical novel.

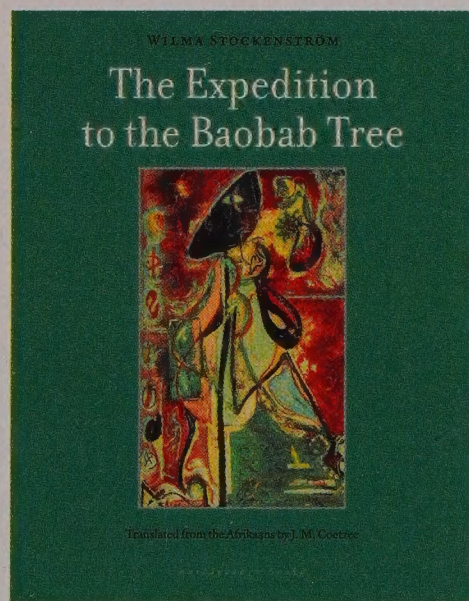
JEFFREY EUGENIDES



Knausgaard is intense and utterly honest, unafraid to voice universal anxieties...

JAMES WOOD, *The New Yorker*

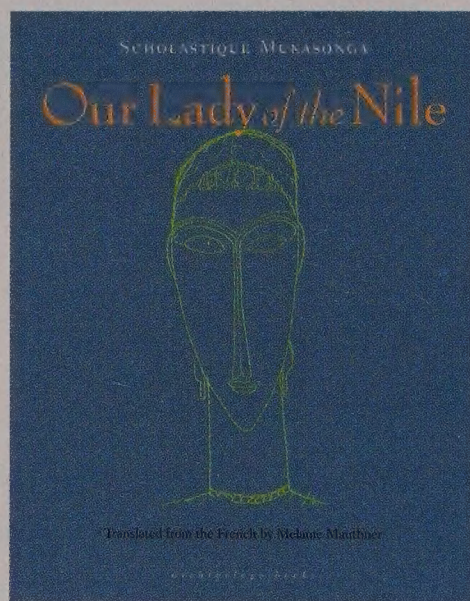
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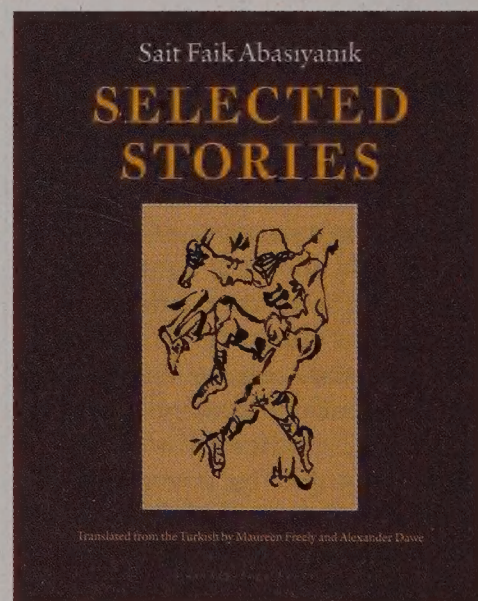
SEPTEMBER 2014



In a writing style both gritty and tender, *Our Lady of the Nile* depicts a society inevitably heading towards horror ... Poignant and tenacious.

CHRISTINE ROUSSEAU, *Le Monde*

DECEMBER 2014



Sait Faik wrote the way he lived – spontaneously, sensually, impressionistically, experientially, always stressing the authentic touch and the ring of truth.

TALAT S. HALMAN



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FROM THE ARCHIVE

40 years ago in  
Harper's Magazine

# INTERROGATION

By Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

If the intellectuals in the plays of Chekhov who spent all their time guessing what would happen in twenty, thirty, or forty years had been told that in forty years interrogation by torture would be practiced in Russia; that prisoners would have their skulls squeezed within iron rings; that human beings would be lowered into acid baths; that they would be trussed up naked to be bitten by ants and bedbugs; that ramrods heated over primus stoves would be thrust up their anal canals (the "secret brand"); that a man's genitals would be slowly crushed beneath the toe of a jackboot; and that in the luckiest possible circumstances, prisoners would be tortured by being kept from sleeping for a week, by thirst, and by being beaten to a bloody pulp, not one of Chekhov's plays would have gotten to its end, because all the heroes would have gone off to insane asylums.

And not only Chekhov's heroes—what normal Russian at the beginning of the century, including any member of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, would have believed, would have tolerated, such a slander against the bright future? What had been acceptable under Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich in the seventeenth century, what had already been regarded as barbarism under Peter the Great, what might have been used against ten or twenty people in all during the time of Biron in the mid-eighteenth century, what had already become totally impossible under Catherine the Great, was all being practiced during the flowering of the glorious twentieth century—in a society based on socialist principles, and at a time when airplanes were flying and the radio and talking films had already appeared—not by one scoundrel alone in one

secret place only, but by tens of thousands of specially trained human beasts standing over millions of defenseless victims.

Was it only that explosion of atavism now evasively called "the cult of personality" that was so horrible? Or was it even more horrible that during those same years, in 1937 itself, we celebrated Pushkin's centennial? And that we shamelessly continued to stage those selfsame Chekhov plays, even though the answers to them had already come in? Is it not still more dreadful that we are now being told, thirty years later, "Don't talk about it!"? If we start to recall the sufferings of millions, we are told, it will distort the historical perspective! If we doggedly seek out the essence of our morality, we are told it will darken our material progress! Let's think rather about the blast furnaces, the rolling mills that were built, the canals that were dug. We can talk about anything, so long as we do it adroitly, so long as we glorify it.

It is really hard to see why we condemn the Inquisition. Wasn't it true that beside the autos-da-fé, magnificent services were offered by the Almighty? It is hard to see why we are so down on serfdom. After all, no one forbade the peasants to work every day. And they could sing carols at Christmas, too. And for Trinity Day the girls wove wreaths...

All the big Bolsheviks, who now wear martyrs' halos, managed to be the executioners of other Bolsheviks (not even taking into account how all of them in the first place had been the executioners of non-Communists). Perhaps 1937 was needed in order to show how little their whole ideology was

worth—that ideology of which they boasted so enthusiastically, turning Russia upside down, destroying its foundations, trampling everything it held sacred underfoot, that Russia where they themselves had never been threatened by such retribution. The victims of the Bolsheviks from 1918 to 1946 never conducted themselves so despicably as the leading Bolsheviks when the lightning struck them. If you study in detail the whole history of the arrests and trials of 1936 to 1938, the principal revulsion you feel is not against Stalin and his accomplices, but against the humiliatingly repulsive defendants—nausea at their spiritual baseness after their former pride and implacability.

So what is the answer? How can you stand your ground when you are weak and sensitive to pain, when people you love are still alive, when you are unprepared?

What do you need to make you stronger than the interrogator and the whole trap?

From the moment you go to prison you must put your cozy past firmly behind you. At the very threshold, you must say to yourself: "My life is over, a little early to be sure, but there's nothing to be done about it. I shall never return to freedom. I am condemned to die—now or a little later. But later on, in truth, it will be even harder, and so the sooner the better. I no longer have any property whatsoever. For me those I love have died, and for them I have died. From today on, my body is useless and alien to me. Only my spirit and my conscience remain precious and important to me."

Confronted by such a prisoner, the interrogation will tremble.

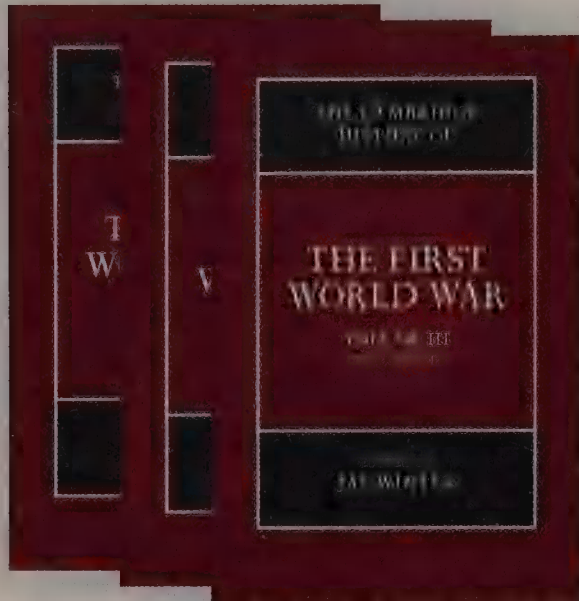
Only the man who has renounced everything can win that victory. ■

From an excerpt of *The Gulag Archipelago* published in the July 1974 issue of Harper's Magazine, shortly after Solzhenitsyn's expulsion from the Soviet Union. The complete excerpt—along with the magazine's entire 164-year archive—is available online at [harpers.org/fromthearchive](http://harpers.org/fromthearchive).



# CAMBRIDGE HONORS

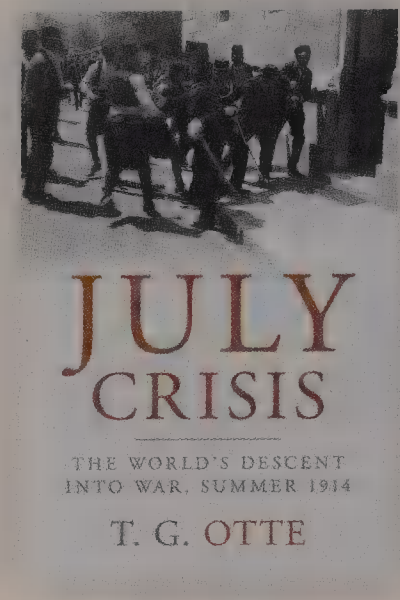
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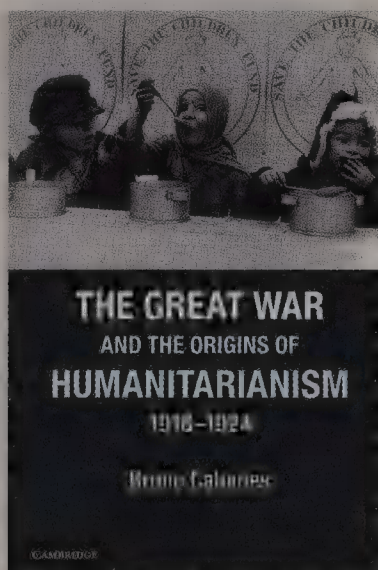


### July Crisis

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**Keith Neilson**

*Author of Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919–1939*

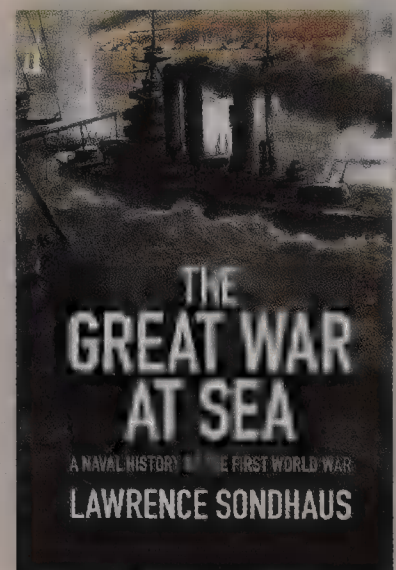


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# HARPER'S INDEX

Portion of Americans who live in areas with harmful levels of air pollution ■ 1/2

Number of the top five most polluted cities in the country that are in California ■ 5

Estimated number of California eighth graders given an essay assignment this year about whether the Holocaust happened ■ 2,000

Percentage of U.S. public-school students who are racial or ethnic minorities ■ 42

Percentage of U.S. public-school teachers who are ■ 18

Factor by which a black student is likelier than a white student to attend a school with a high number of new teachers ■ 4

Average amount of higher-education tax credits received by families making less than \$25,000 a year ■ \$930

By families making more than \$100,000 a year ■ \$2,490

Factor by which a wealthy American is more likely than a poor American to vote in a midterm election ■ 2

Portion of poor and affluent men, respectively, who favor raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour ■ 72, 35

Of poor and affluent women ■ 69, 67

Minimum amount stolen through wage theft by U.S. employers in 2012 ■ \$280,000,000

Estimated amount stolen in street, bank, and convenience-store thefts that year ■ \$139,000,000

Factor by which the average compensation for CEOs of fast-food companies has increased since 2000 ■ 7

Factor by which a woman working in the restaurant industry is likelier than the average female worker to be sexually harassed ■ 5

Portion of U.S. workers working for tips who are women ■ 3/4

Factor by which a tipped worker is likelier to be on food stamps than the average U.S. worker ■ 2

Percentage more per patient that Medicare pays the average male doctor than the average female doctor ■ 24

Portion of U.S. doctors who say they would discourage an aspirant from joining the profession ■ 9/10

Percentage of children in single-mother Scandinavian families who are living in poverty ■ 11

In single-mother U.S. families ■ 55

Percentage of U.S. teenagers who receive no formal sex education before having sex for the first time ■ 83

Percentage of heterosexual male British student athletes who say they have “cuddled” with another male ■ 92

Percentage of white Americans who support paying college athletes ■ 24

Of black Americans who do ■ 51

Percentage change since 2009 in the number of race-related complaints filed against U.S. colleges and universities ■ +55

Portion of requests from white male students for meetings with their business-school professors that receive responses ■ 4/5

Portion of requests from Indian male students that do ■ 1/3

Percentage increase in the past two decades in the portion of new U.S. marriages between people of different races ■ +67

Percentage of U.S. women prisoners who are mothers of young children ■ 61

Chance that a teenager in a New York City jail has a history of traumatic brain injury ■ 1 in 2

Percentage change in the past five years in the number of deportations ordered by U.S. immigration courts ■ -44

In the number of cases in the courts' backlog ■ +57

Percentage change since 1980 in the number of private security guards employed in the United States ■ +100

Portion of people employed in computer occupations in the United States who are men ■ 2/3

Amount the United States has committed to spending on an alternative Internet network for dissidents in Cuba ■ \$4,300,000

Chance that a citizen of Pakistan believes that Internet access free of government censorship is important ■ 1 in 5

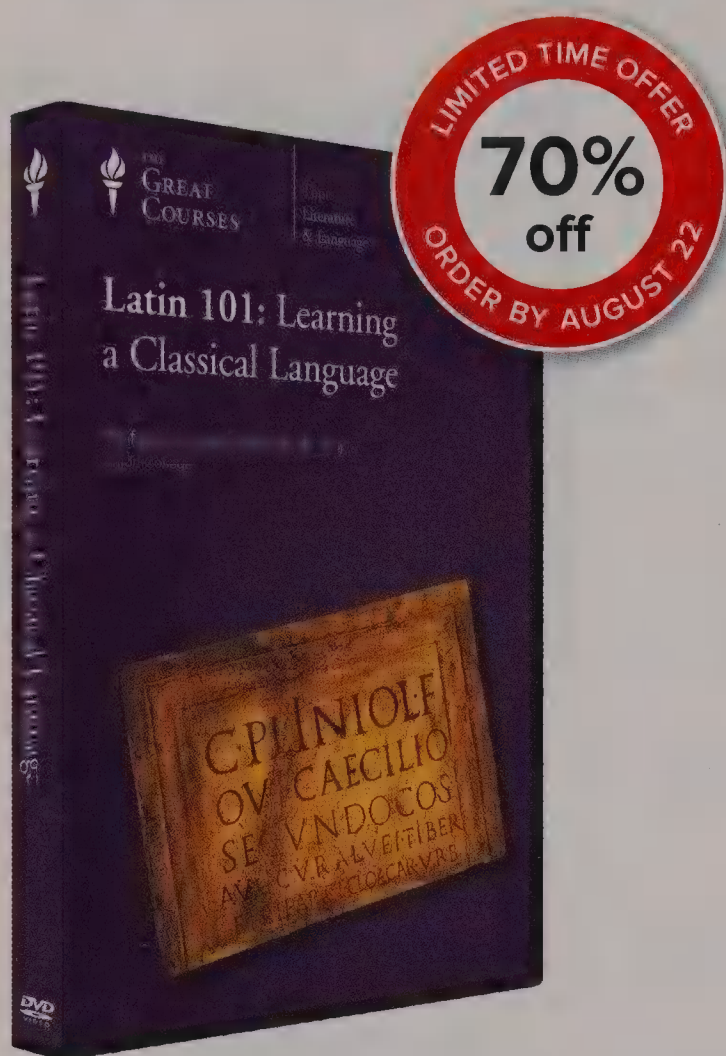
Percentage of the world's 25 largest news organizations that have been targeted by state-backed hackers ■ 84

Ratio of public relations specialists to journalists working in the United States ■ 4.6:1

*Figures cited are the latest available as of May 2014. Sources are listed on page 98.*

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11. First- and Second-Conjugation Verbs
12. Reading a Famous Latin Love Poem
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14. Third-Declension Adjectives
15. Third-Declension /-Stem Nouns
16. The Relative Pronoun
17. The Imperfect and Future Tenses
18. Building Translation Skills
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20. Demonstrative Adjectives and Pronouns
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22. Forming and Using Participles
23. Using the Infinitive
24. Reading a Passage from Caesar
25. The Perfect Tense Passive System
26. Deponent Verbs
27. Conditional Sentences
28. *Cum* Clauses and Stipulations
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# READINGS

[Essay]

## THE GLOBAL GAME

*By Simon Kuper, a columnist for the Financial Times, from lectures delivered in April at Occidental and Pitzer Colleges. Kuper's books on soccer include Soccernomics, which he co-wrote with Stefan Szymanski.*

When Lionel Messi was thirteen years old, he and his family left their hometown of Rosario, Argentina, and moved to Barcelona, a city about which they knew so little that they were surprised to discover it was on the sea. FC Barcelona, the wealthy local soccer club, had agreed to pay for the hormone treatments that the tiny soccer prodigy needed to reach a normal height. Messi—now twenty-seven years old, five feet six inches tall, and possibly the world's best player—has been with Barça ever since. But in this year's World Cup in Brazil, he represents Argentina, as he always does in international competition.

Messi has rarely excelled for his national team, and many of his compatriots accuse him of being insufficiently Argentine—of not “sweating the shirt.” In 2012 he scored a world-record ninety-one goals (seventy-nine of them for Barcelona), yet he finished third in the Argentine vote for sportsman of the year. Meanwhile, admirers from Myanmar to Manhattan, who watch him every week on television, cheer him on with no reservation. He now belongs less to Argentina than to the world, a fate that

mirrors the evolution of soccer itself, which in turn exemplifies the ongoing globalization of daily life. It's a transformation I can attest to personally, having attended every World Cup since 1990 and watched the planet's biggest nationalist spectacle evolve into a cosmopolitan party.

The World Cup was created after the success of the Olympic soccer tournaments of the 1920s, and the first edition was held in Uruguay in 1930. Benito Mussolini was probably the pioneer in seeking national prestige through soccer—he was very pleased when Italy won the World Cups of 1934 and 1938. At the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Albert Forster, a Nazi gauleiter serving in Poland, persuaded Hitler to watch Germany thrash little Norway at soccer. Joseph Goebbels, who attended the match with Hitler, wrote in his diary: “The Führer is very excited. I can barely contain myself. A real bath of nerves. The crowd rages. A battle like never before. The game as mass suggestion.” But to Forster's mortification, Germany lost 2–0. It seems to have been the only soccer match Hitler ever saw.

After 1945, nationalism in Europe ceased to prompt wars; instead it became World Cup nationalism. Perhaps the earliest outbreak occurred in 1954, after West Germany beat the great Hungarians in the mud of Bern, Switzerland. The story of that day, the *Wunder von Bern*, became a founding myth of emergent West Germany: Germans gathered around the only TV set in their neighborhood to watch the game, mobbed the train carrying the winning players home at every station, and celebrated on the streets in West and East Germany. After the



[Interview]

## LIBRARY OF DRIBBLE

*From Conversations, a collection of dialogues conducted in 1984 and 1985 between Jorge Luis Borges and the Argentine poet Osvaldo Ferrari, out next month from Seagull Books. Translated from the Spanish by Jason Wilson.*

OSVALDO FERRARI: In many of our conversations we approach, unawares, the National Library on México Street, where you were the director.

JORGE LUIS BORGES: Yes.

FERRARI: For a long time I have wanted to know the journey that brought you to that library—that is, the libraries you worked in before reaching the National Library.

BORGES: I worked for nine years in the Miguel Cané library on Carlos Calvo and Muñiz. We were, I believe, some fifty employees, and the work we had to do was completed in, let's say, half an hour or three quarters of an hour. The next six hours we dedicated to talk of football—something I am deeply ignorant of—or gossip and dirty stories. So I hid myself reading the books in the library. To those nine years I owe my knowledge of the works of Léon Bloy and Paul Claudel, and I discovered books I'd never heard of.

FERRARI: In that atmosphere, you decided to read more difficult works than at home.

BORGES: That's true, yes. [Laughs] But that I was reading books did not meet with approval. One day I was asked which "square" I preferred and thought they were referring to a canvas or an oil painting. But no, "square" meant football pitch. So I said I knew absolutely nothing about football. They told me that as we worked in the Boedo and San Juan area, I should say that I supported San Lorenzo de Almagro. I learned that by heart and always said that I supported San Lorenzo so as not to offend my colleagues. But I noticed that San Lorenzo de Almagro almost never won. So I talked with them and they said, no, the fact of winning or losing was secondary—and they were right—but San Lorenzo was the most "scientific" team of all.

FERRARI: They told you that.

BORGES: Yes, that they were scientific.

FERRARI: That they lost scientifically.

BORGES: Yes, that they didn't know how to win, but lost methodically.

final, people in Bern and across Germany had sung the national anthem with its old verse—taboo in the post-Nazi years—"Deutschland, Deutschland über alles." Two weeks later, at official celebrations in West Berlin, the West German president Theodor Heuss frantically coached the crowd in the new opening line, "Unity and right and freedom." The German phrase most associated with the Bern victory is "Wir sind wieder wer": "We are somebody again." Soccer had begun to create a proud new German nation.

Over the second half of the twentieth century, interest in soccer spread through all social classes. World Cups became the most-watched televised events on earth. For many Europeans and Latin Americans in particular, national soccer teams came to define the nation. Those eleven young men in plastic shirts were the nation made flesh—more alive than the flag, less individual than the queen, more tangible than gross domestic product. While the Super Bowl draws about one in three Americans, World Cup matches are often viewed by more than half of a participating country's national audience. In 2010, 12.3 million Dutch people—three quarters of the population—watched at least some of the Holland-Uruguay semifinal. That match was the biggest Dutch communal experience since the war, just as France's home victory in the World Cup of 1998 was the biggest French communal experience since the liberation of Paris in 1944—

though in 1998 all French people were on the same side.

Nationalism needs an enemy, and into the 1990s the enemy for most European countries was Germany. England's unofficial soccer anthem, "Three Lions," is mostly about big games against Germany. France's greatest soccer trauma was its defeat by West Germany in Seville at the 1982 World Cup. The Dutch, the Danes—indeed perhaps half the countries of Europe—date the emotional peaks of their soccer history to matches against Germans.

It had to do with the war, of course. The French TV commentator Georges de Caunes said that for French men of his generation, the karate kick inflicted in Seville by the German goalkeeper Toni Schumacher on France's Patrick Battiston evoked feelings from wartime. After Holland beat West Germany in the 1988 European Football Championship, millions of Dutch people celebrated in the streets, in the largest public gathering since the end of the Nazi occupation. But the anti-German feelings also had to do with the present. The almost unbeatable West German teams, from 1954 through 1990, incarnated rich postwar West Germany.





Discovery, a painting by Ricky Allman, whose work was on view in June at Galleri Benoni, in Copenhagen.

Those German teams gave meaning to World Cups of the nationalist era. As the journalist David Winner has said, “In terms of story the greatest nation in the history of football is Germany. A World Cup without Germany would be like *Star Wars* without Darth Vader.” For Europeans, Germany was the perfect villain, the bad guy who killed the beautiful teams—Hungary in 1954, Holland in 1974, and France in 1982.

Latin America—the only region outside of Europe well represented in the World Cups of this era—brought another set of nationalist frustrations to the game. For Argentines in particular, this meant anger at England. Though never a British colony, Argentina was economically part of Britain’s “informal empire” until about the First World War. The Brits built railways and shipped Argentine beef abroad. When Argentina first beat England at soccer, in 1953, an Argentine politician said: “We have nationalized the railways, and now we have nationalized soccer!”

After England defeated Argentina 1–0 in a bad-tempered 1966 World Cup quarterfinal, England’s manager, Alf Ramsey, described the

Argentine players as “animals.” Many Argentines read this as classic British racism. England became their Germany. Argentine frustrations poured out in the World Cup quarterfinal in Mexico City in 1986, in which they beat England 2–1 thanks to two goals from Diego Maradona: the first a cheeky handball that the referee didn’t spot, the second a dribble through half the English side. The latter was possibly the best goal ever scored in a World Cup, but Maradona wrote in his autobiography that in some ways he preferred the “Hand of God.” Why? “It was a bit like stealing the wallet of the English.”

Maradona’s account of the match harks back to Argentina’s defeat in the Falkland Islands—or the *Islas Malvinas*—in 1982. “It was as if we had beaten a country, not just a football team,” he wrote. “Although we had said before the game that football had nothing to do with the *Malvinas War*, we knew they had killed a lot of Argentine boys there, killed them like little birds. And this was revenge.”

By the 1990 cup, the Berlin Wall had fallen; European economic unification was under way; China had opened to the West. The Internet,



cable TV, international financial markets, and the rise of English as a global language all did their part to erase borders, as did cheap air travel and high-speed trains. Though it may be difficult to recognize from an American perspective, there was a drastic decline in transnational wars. Nationalism was becoming outmoded.

**S**occer, too, globalized fast. If you lived in New York City in 1990, it was hard even to find out Arsenal's result. Gradually bars began showing the Arsenal game. Nowadays New Yorkers can—and often do—live-tweet the matches from their sofas.

The collapse of international trade barriers reached soccer in 1996, when the so-called Bosman ruling allowed Europeans and many non-Europeans to change clubs across European borders with very few obstacles. Arsenal, hitherto an English club, became an international one. When France won the World Cup in 1998, Britain's *Daily Mirror* ran the front-

page headline ARSENAL WINS THE WORLD CUP, above a photo of two French Arsenal players embracing on the pitch.

Before about the 1990s, each country had its own style, often described in stereotypes widely understood as expressions of national character: the Germans were supposedly machinelike, the English played like warriors, the Brazilians dribbled “to the rhythm of samba,” and so on. As players moved between countries and played more international club soccer, they became increasingly similar. Michael Owen, the longtime England striker, told me he'd grown up a European player, not an English one. You saw it in his dives. Before Owen, the English considered diving to trick a referee into giving a free kick a marker of unmanly foreignness. To some extent they still do; but it's harder to hold that view now that English players also dive and kiss teammates on the cheeks and sometimes even pass like Spaniards. The Spaniards learned their *tiki-taka* passing game from the Dutch, and later the Germans borrowed it from the Spaniards. National styles are dying out. At the top now, there's only an international style.

The World Cup at which I first grasped the fading of old-style nationalism was in 2006, in Germany. That summer you could see a shift to a kind of carnival nationalism: people from around the world dressed up, each in their own national colors, and then watched games together on public squares with giant screens. (For some games, close to a million people gathered at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate.) Oliver Bierhoff, the German team's general manager, remarked with surprise that fans had become less interested in results. Above all, they were out to have fun. It was no longer a matter of national virility, or life and death.

That 2006 World Cup was a pan-European lovefest for the German hosts, a festival to mark the true end of World War II, which was why it had to end in Berlin. A few days before the final, I attended a conference on soccer and history at the Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, the suburban villa where high officials of the Third Reich met in 1942 to discuss the implementation of the Final Solution. The day I arrived it was boiling hot, and from the villa's garden you could see people sunbathing all around the Greater Wannsee lake. I went for a stroll in the woods with an official from the DFB, the German soccer association, whose job it was to deal with questions about history. Any journalist with a question about the DFB and the war was put through to him. I asked whether he'd had many war-related calls during the World Cup. “No, not one,” he said.

[Plea]

## A FAN'S NOTE

*From a letter dated June 15, 2012, discovered in a Saks Fifth Avenue shopping bag by a customer. This year, a man claiming to be the author was identified by DNAinfo.com. Samuel Eto'o is a Cameroonian soccer player with the English Premier League team Chelsea.*

HELP! HELP! HELP!!

Hello!!

I'm Njong Emmanuel Tohnain, Cameroonian of nationality. I'm presently serving a 3 years imprisonment sentence in Qingdao City in Shandong province of China since the 11th of May 2011 for an alleged charge of fraud with unfair and unjustified judgment. I've been molested and tortured physically, morally, psychologically, and spiritually for all this while without any given chance to contact my family and friends. We are ill-treated and work like slaves for 13 hours every day producing these bags in bulk in the prison factory.

Please help me contact the United Nations Human Rights Department or if possible contact Samuel Eto'o Fils and let them know my sad story. I'm Eto'o's fan club manager in the University of Yaoundé II. Thanks and sorry to bother you.



You still get the odd reference to Nazis and wars at some matches—English fans imitating bomber planes at England-Germany games, for instance—but now it's generally done as a joke. The war is being used to spice up what have become almost entirely just soccer rivalries. This isn't old-style nationalism anymore. It's carnival nationalism, the World Cup minus the hate.

Leading soccer players have joined the 0.1 Percent, the transnational elite more at home in first-class airport lounges than in the streets of their own countries. Cristiano Ronaldo, Thiago Silva, and Mesut Özil now resemble one another more than they do their compatriots. In a vicious Holland-Portugal game in Nuremberg in 2006 in which four players were sent off, two of them, Holland's Giovanni van Bronckhorst and Portugal's Deco, sat down together by the touchline and chatted while the match finished. After all, they were colleagues at Barcelona—fellow cosmopolitans. In Portugal's next match, the quarterfinal against England, Cristiano Ronaldo lobbied the referee to get his Manchester United teammate Wayne Rooney sent off, but after the game Rooney reportedly sent him a peacemaking text message. It's harder to feel blind nationalism about the World Cup when the protagonists themselves don't.

Many fans are even starting to *choose* which national team to support. At Brazil's first match at the 2006 World Cup, against Croatia in Berlin, tens of thousands of people showed up in Brazil's famous canary-yellow shirts. But walking around the stadium before the game, I realized that few of them were Brazilians. They were Germans, Japanese, Brits, people from everywhere who wanted a share in Brazil's myth. That phenomenon was being replicated in living rooms around the world. "Since the 1970s, when film and television coverage of the team first reached Africa and Asia," writes soccer's premier historian, David Goldblatt, "the Brazilians have been supported across the global south, often alongside or even in preference to national teams." Israelis and Palestinians, for instance, share a love of Brazil. This transnationalism is driven partly by club soccer: if you're an Englishman who supports Chelsea, you now probably feel more warmly about Chelsea players like the Belgian Eden Hazard or the Cameroonian Samuel Eto'o than you do about the English Rooney, who usually makes his living besieging Chelsea in the pay of Manchester United.

National teams have kept getting more cosmopolitan. That's partly because most of the countries that produce good soccer players are in Western Europe. Jürgen Klinsmann, the Ger-

man head coach of the U.S. national team, has recruited several players raised in Germany, the sons of German mothers and American military fathers. Bosnia has its own German contingent, and its striker, Vedad Ibisević, was once a high school soccer star in St. Louis. Many African teams recruit heavily from their European diasporas. Most of Algeria's squad currently in Brazil for the World Cup consists of players born in France. Didier Drogba, the great Ivorian center-forward, emigrated from Abidjan to France at the age of five, sent by his parents to live with an uncle who was a journeyman soccer player there.

Soccer is finally living up to its long-standing reputation as the "global game." The world's four most populous countries—China, India, the United States, and Indonesia—account between them for about 45 percent of humanity, and they have just begun switching on to soccer in large numbers. These new fans often have weak local loyalties. Their hearts are in faraway places like Manchester or Barcelona.

At the last World Cup, in 2010, USA's defeat by Ghana drew 19.4 million American TV viewers—during daytime on a Saturday. That beat the average TV audience for a game in baseball's World Series or the NBA finals that year. The Seattle Sounders now draw larger home crowds than European giants like Chelsea, Tottenham Hotspur, and Juventus. By far the biggest group of visiting fans at the Brazilian World Cup are Americans.

Today two groups of Americans follow soccer most keenly. The first are immigrants, chiefly the country's approximately 53 million Hispanics. The second are the educated elite. There's a growing American tribe of "soccer nerds," who insist on calling the game "football" and can knock you out with long analyses of Manchester City's defensive issues. (We European pundits disagree on the correct strategy for surviving these encounters, but my own policy is to flee.) Soccer—especially European soccer—makes American fans feel like cosmopolitans. That may be why American soccer fans tend to be Democrats, even though sports fans overall lean Republican.

The millions of Americans who rise before dawn to watch games beamed from English towns they will likely never visit are part of the worldwide retreat from nationalism. While it's true that this year's World Cup begins in the shadow of classically nationalist behavior by Russia, this seems more a last gasp than a renewal of nationalist sentiment. By some measures the Russian invasion of Ukraine was the first war anywhere in the world between states since Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. This might not sound so impressive, but for centuries Europe





"AUTOMOBILE. Field Sobriety Test. Photographer Unknown. 07-06-1958," one in a series of photographs from the archives of the Los Angeles Police Department on view in April at Paris Photo LA.

alone has averaged several such conflicts a year. Amid the recent surge in revolutions and coups within states, the old great powers have resisted the urge to wrap themselves in the flag and intervene. And what's noticeable in Crimea is that nobody wants to fight, except perhaps Putin himself. Most Russians say in polls that they don't want a war with Ukraine; the Ukrainian army pulled out of Crimea rather than fighting for it (even if it is attempting to crack down on separatists in the east); in the United States, not even hawks like John McCain are proposing military intervention. Last year 52 percent of Americans polled by the Pew Research Center agreed with the statement that "the U.S. should mind its own business internationally"—the highest proportion since pollsters first asked that question fifty years ago.

Nationalism, the Iraqi-born British historian Elie Kedourie wrote, "is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century." Within soccer and without, that doctrine may be nearing the end of its run.

[Fiction]

## DEMOCRACY IN BATUMI

By Christina Nichol, from *Waiting for the Electricity*, her debut novel, published last month by Overlook.

Dear Hillary Clinton:

My name is Slims Achmed Makashvili and i am from the little town called Batumi, on the Black Sea. it is the very small town. So to say, it is beautiful and sunny. It is the town for me.

Batumi is the little town that not many people know about. i know because i looked up Batumi on the Internet and there was only one picture of the palm tree. The tourist wrote, "this town looks like chipped paint." That is because we are under reconstruction. The local dictator is tearing down the old buildings and



making many of the lawns in our town because no one can hide behind a lawn with a gun. In addition, the religious leaders are building 12th century spirituality huts. We are progressing civically and religiously. We even have a bank. It is shiny and modern bank but has no money left in it. New certification requirement in 1998 decreased the number of banks from 200 to 43. i really think we need little help over here in the farmer land.

But now I will explain to You the more important information about how Batumi is the natural port. Port lies at the end of the railroad from Baku and is used mainly for petroleum product. Our town boasts of eight berths which have total capacity of 100,000 tonnes of general cargo, 800,000 tonnes of bulk cargo, and 6 million tonnes of oil and gas product. Facilities include portal cranes and loaders for moving containers onto rail car. As You can see, Batumi offers You and Your country great business opportunity!

Hillary, i'll try to write to You more about myself, but i'm not as interesting person as You are, obviously, but still i'll write something. I love animals, especially fish. Once i had the fish which i called billclinton, but unfortunately it had eaten some poisoned thing and that was the end of his life. And what about You? Do You like animals or have You a pet? We've a small garden at home, but mostly i love cactus.

i am the maritime lawyer but personally it is the very dull life. The bosses are old communists and the unfortunate circumstance is that the laws of our country can't change until they all die off.

Now i wish to ask to You very important question: Have You seen the movie Jesus Christ Superstar? Do You know about the theme song in the movie, "Don't you mind about the future. Think about today instead." ?!(!) We have been living that way for very long time now, for 15 centuries maybe, and i don't think it's very good advice. We have freed ourselves from Russia, are holding out our hand, and waiting for help up.

Respecting Your way,  
Slims Achmed Makashvili

Dear Hillary,

Your version of Democracy and our version are quite different. Our version means if the leader says something we say, "Yes, you are right!"

By the way, I just read that U.S. Troops, GI Joes, are recently deployed in Georgia, fighting against terrorism :-), training Georgian "commandos" ;- ) called Special Operation Caspian Guard, and U.S. is spending 64 million dollars for their training. But do you have any idea who

[Criticism]

## POLITICAL CALCULUS

*From an interview with Lyubov Ulyakhina, an expert hired by the Russian Academy of Education, published in April on the Russian news site Znak.com. In March, Russia's Ministry of Education and Science declared that a set of math textbooks would be dropped from a list of recommended materials because of their non-Russian content. Translated from the Russian by Alan Yuhas.*

ZNAK.COM: Why doesn't this textbook cultivate patriotism or love for family and fatherland?

LYUBOV ULYAKHINA: Let's open it. Mathematics is a science, so what relationship could it possibly have with love for your homeland? The author is tasked with molding a child's character, not just teaching him to count. On the first pages we see gnomes, Snow White—representatives of a foreign culture. Here again, gnomes. It surprised me that they put so many; I started wondering whether gnomes do anything to advance mathematical understanding. Look, here's some kind of monkey, and Little Red Riding Hood. People attacked me, saying it's ridiculous to talk about patriotism in a math textbook, but I counted, and of the 119 characters drawn here, only nine have any relation to Russian culture.

ZNAK.COM: One of your complaints is the abundance of gnomes.

ULYAKHINA: Note how lovingly drawn are the characters of Western culture and how carelessly are our own. These *matryoshka* dolls, what do they have under their eyes?

ZNAK.COM: I think they're wearing glasses. Like grannies in glasses, no?

ULYAKHINA: They look to me like bruises. Where did this disdain for our culture come from? Here are letters of the Old Slavonic alphabet, carelessly painted in blue ink. Where in our ancient books is blue ink? The letters are portrayed as scribbly doodles. On the next assignment, some Roman numerals—look how beautifully they've been written out. Here's a figure of some children fighting—it's just excellent, one of my favorites. They didn't share the ball, and the boy, as we see, won. Long live strength. But what about this lady who comes to the little girl's aid? She's a fairy, but in our culture there's no such phenomenon. Next to that, look at this ugly, fuzzy drawing of Grandfather Frost. What would you think of a grandfather with a face like this? That he's drunk, right? It's simply tasteless.



they are fighting against? Perhaps a villager to get access to his potato field to bury an oil pipeline? New government says we are approaching new democracy :-) but we just have to wait.

I have some good news to report to you though. You will be happy to know that your own local Center for Democracy in Batumi enlarged their office after they evicted some families who were living in the east wing. They now also have purchased a modern air-conditioning unit which will be useful in the summer.

In other news: thousands of pigs died in my village last month. It was probably a conspiracy by the Turkish pork sellers because our scientists say that Georgian pigs have the best quality of meat. It won't be a good *kingkali* year because there's no pork to put in the noodle. But don't be so sad, Hillary. It's nothing.

Dear Hillary,

I take it back. I didn't mean it. I wanted the law but not like this. I didn't mean the American law.

Everyone is confused. It's too complicated, not simple anymore. President Saakashvili is tearing down people's homes. They must live in the yard. The new government is checking everyone's papers now, to ensure that they are the official owners of their houses, scouring the countryside for people without papers, trying to implement these new American laws. But in some mountains, like Svanetia, the people have lived in their towers for 1,200 years and now they must show their papers, these proofs of purchase? I can understand if it's in a town. But the President is requiring this even from the hard workers next to my village, the ones who are living near the border with Armenia. Their land is valuable sea-side property, you know.

Everything comes from America now, even this Saturday night live show on TV. They show Playboy pictures and sing about the sexy daughter-in-law in the background. It is important to have something sacred inside. Yes? What is going to happen with this capitalism? I worry. Money makes people crazy and they lose the sacred thing inside. We are not like Turkish people who work all the time. We Georgians believe we were put on this earth to relax, to enjoy the Paradise that God gave us, to have good thoughts and good deeds. It is not noble to think one thing, speak another, write another, and do another. So I will stop writing to you now. Remember me. My name is Slims Achmed Makashvili and I am from the 12th century.

p.s. If your country ever experiences the economic problems that we did, and heads toward a collapse, remember that it happens so quickly.

Soon the roads become like the garden. But remember this, when you only think about how to put bread on the table there is no more time for metaphysics, no more time for depression. And if that ever happens, don't worry, be happy! Soon you will have rich Georgian tourists crazy for American nostalgia.

[Sociology]

## SILICON ALLY

*From an interview with Richard Rodriguez published in the Spring 2014 issue of Boom: A Journal of California. Rodriguez is the author, most recently, of Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography, excerpted last July in Harper's Magazine.*

BOOM: A lot of people seem very concerned about the change that those Google buses signal in San Francisco. Do you share those concerns?

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ: No, because I've always loved wealth. I've loved being around it. If I knew you were wealthy, I would have made friends with you in grammar school. I knew the house where Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan lived in Sacramento, because I played there. I knew those people. I knew all the people on that block. They went to school with me. My trick was to know your mother, because I knew that if I ingratiated myself with your mother, remarked on how good the lunch was, she'd invite me back. She'd say, "Who is that nice little boy?" And the kid was not interested in me, with two exceptions. There's one kid who died of an oversize heart. He taught me to listen to Frank Sinatra. I thought that's what rich people listened to, because he loved jazz.

I love rich people, and so I love them at the market, these impossibly beautiful Indian women who obviously have money. The way I used to go to the food market in Brentwood and I would love seeing rich people shopping. The way I would watch Fred Astaire walking up to communion. It's just interesting how they deal with it, their impatience standing in lines, their bratty children, their beauty, their anxieties, their loneliness, their glamour, the sound of their car doors shutting, which doesn't sound anything like my Honda. It interests me. It's like living in London in



the eighteenth century, a place of people with such enormous wealth living among people who have none.

This is my American character. I'm not threatened by great wealth. I'm interested in it. Not that I will have it for myself, not that I even want it, though I have a lot of charities that I'd like to give money to. I don't have enough money. But there's so much want. Gosh, just so many food banks, so many libraries and teachers and organizations, school districts that don't have anything. Then when I see somebody go buy a Lamborghini or a Bentley—I saw this woman in a Bentley the other day, caught in traffic as I was, and she was distracted. And when a beautiful woman is distracted, she can be even more beautiful. But I thought, Oh, I wonder where she's been or where she's going, and that interested me. And I was happy to live in this city. You know, there is a Virginia Woolf novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the main character is walking up Bond Street, and a royal goes by in a Rolls-Royce, and she only sees the arm holding the little support by the window. And there's speculation about who it is, a prince, princess, or even indeed the king, and the traffic sort of gives way. Well, when I see these buses, I know they don't live in my world, and yet they do. It interests me.

I walk home from the gym, up Fillmore, and for two blocks, we're in the projects. On one block where there is a police station, there is also a congregation of young males, black males, and obviously drug traffic. The persistence of white gentrification is such now that white people walk through this like it doesn't exist. It's really thrilling to me that people can be that oblivious. The other day, there was a shoot-out. This was at four in the afternoon on a Saturday. A kid was dragged out of a car, and he ran. Right in front of a restaurant—we're getting just to the edge of gentrification—there were gunshots. I was just watching—bang, bang, bang! One kid, as he's running away, sees me watching, and we hold each other's glance for a second. It is really intense, and then he runs past. I live in that. Within five blocks, we are safely within the yuppie precinct, and it is impossible that that just happened. That's very interesting to me.

You know, one of the things that is happening in the world right now is that increasingly people are going to restaurants that are in dangerous neighborhoods. In Tijuana, Mexico, for example, there's a new, very experimental kind of nouveau some-

thing in neighborhoods that I would consider too dangerous to go to. I do not understand. My nephew, who has a number of restaurants in Oakland, he's a great believer in being edgy and taking good food to the edge of safety. At the same time that food is advertised as being extremely healthy and in portions that are not overwhelming, there is this possibility that you'll be killed when you go back to your car.

[Poem]

## RUNNING IN THE MUDDY TWILIGHT

By Pier Paolo Pasolini, from *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini*, out this month from University of Chicago Press. Pasolini, a writer and filmmaker, died in 1975. Translated from the Italian by Stephen Sartarelli.

I was running in the muddy twilight  
past decrepit railyards and silent  
scaffolds, through wet neighborhoods  
that smelled of iron and reheated rags  
hoisted up—in the dust-laden spaces  
between tin shacks and sewage  
canals—on newly built, already  
blackened walls against the backdrop  
of a colorless metropolis.

Over broken  
asphalt, through clumps of grass pungent  
with excrement and black stretches  
of mud—dotted with warm, foul pools  
dug out by the rain—queues of cyclists  
and wheezing trucks bearing wood  
scattered headlong here and there  
into suburban centers where  
a few cafés already glowed  
with circles of light, and under the smooth  
walls of a church some young people  
lay mischievously about.

Around already old  
low-income high-rises, rotting gardens  
and construction sites bristling with motionless  
cranes  
stagnated in feverish silence.  
But a bit outside the lamp-lit center,  
beside the silence, a blue asphalt  
street appeared wholly immersed  
in a life as oblivious and intense  
as it was ancient. Though few in number,  
oil lamps glowed with a waning light,





COURTESY THE ARTIST

"Eclipse #2" and "Eclipse #1," crumpled and exposed photographic papers by Karine Laval, whose work was on view in March at Artisphere, in Arlington, Virginia.

and the still-open windows were white with laundry hung out to dry and vibrant with voices inside. Old women sat in the doorways, as a group of boys huddled together, brightly dressed in overalls or knickerbockers as if for a special occasion, joking with girls who were younger than they.

Everything on that street was human, and the people all clung to it tightly, in the windows, on the sidewalks with their rags and their lights ...

It seemed as though man, even deep in his wretched abode, were merely encamped here, like another species, and that his bond with this place, in the grimy, dusty evening, were not an Existence, but a random stop.

Yet the passerby looking on without the innocence of need sought, as a stranger, communion there, at least in the joy of passing and looking. All around was only life, and in that dead world, for him, Reality was reborn.

[Drama]

## AS FLIES TO WANTON BOYS

By Benjamin Kunkel, from *Buzz: A Play*, published in May as part of the *n+1 Small Books Series*. Kunkel is the author of the novel *Indecision* and the essay collection *Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis*.

[TOM and COLLEGE GIRL together. She wields a digital voice recorder, switched on.]

COLLEGE GIRL: Can I say you seem kind of pre-occupied?

TOM: [After a pause] Would you mind turning that thing off for a second?

COLLEGE GIRL: [Doing so] Okay ...

TOM: I haven't mentioned my wife.

COLLEGE GIRL: [Somewhat naughtily] True.

TOM: Not that she's actually my wife, legally ... Even so, Sasha hired some exterminators to get rid of the ... [Gestures vaguely at flies] And when she comes back she's going to see there's a lot more.

COLLEGE GIRL: You say that like it's your fault.



TOM: [Somewhat as if to himself] She also would find you here.

COLLEGE GIRL: She doesn't know I'm here?

TOM: Of course she does. We should return to our previously scheduled conversation. I just wanted to explain to you, as a private—

COLLEGE GIRL: What's so shameful about you have a wife? Breaking: noted playwright left by wife! For work!

TOM: In fact she's not my wife. [Swipes at fly] Damn them! Sorry.

COLLEGE GIRL: Playwright's loft home to flies. And live-in girlfriend!

TOM: Actually if you wouldn't mention them either. It's not usually like this ... Usually it's worse.

COLLEGE GIRL: Have you been in a college dorm lately?

TOM: No one invites me! ... But you were asking something about [Finger quotes] my work.

COLLEGE GIRL: Such a tease. [Turns recorder back on; interviewer's voice] It seems that repeatedly in your plays something is supposed to happen and then doesn't. Is that pattern right? [TOM nods, shrugs.] Could you respond, like, verbally out loud?

TOM: [Following fly with eyes] I'm afraid I don't make for a very fascinating subject today.

COLLEGE GIRL: It's a ten-minute segment. You have ten minutes of fascinatingness in you! Okay, new question. [Interviewer's voice] Tell me, what makes theater so paradoxically important today, with attendance rates in decline, an aging audience ...

TOM: Why is it that people will listen to long, boring interviews on the radio but not plays? I mean radio plays. The form is extinct, no? It's like the more careless and meaningless the speech, the greater the appetite for it.

COLLEGE GIRL: Don't you find it revealing when people are spontaneous, though? Like sometimes in interviews they are? [TOM considers question in silence.] Fuck off! You have to talk.

TOM: Did you just say "fuck" on the radio?

COLLEGE GIRL: We're going to edit some things out.

TOM: [After a pause] But interviews aren't spontaneous. It's just careful on-message stuff. You're not waiting for me to say something terrible, are you? Should I say that I think maybe it's okay for grown men to sleep with teenage boys, and how, say what you will about Hitler, he got people back to work?

COLLEGE GIRL: Do you think it's okay for grown men—

TOM: No no. Just for Hitler ... In the theater—do you mind if I'm sententious for a second?—

COLLEGE GIRL: I'd love it.

TOM: In the theater the carefulness and the carelessness of speech are much more interestingly intertwined than in some interview.

COLLEGE GIRL: I think people like reality. Maybe you think that's bad taste. [Interviewer's voice] Does it disappoint you that today's prominent young playwrights are not more well known?

TOM: It disappoints me that we aren't more young. [Smashes fly] Got him!

COLLEGE GIRL: Could you please say something sort of interesting about the theater?

TOM: [Having come up with a theory] It's interesting—or we'll see if it is—the relationship between the theater and marriage. Or coupledness. The theater has a very ironic relationship to domestic life, don't you think? Because what's been the main preoccupation for more than a hundred years? I'm thinking Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Pinter ... About the biggest theme is the horror of conventional domestic arrangements. And all these spousal or couply relationships are revealed, in the theater, to consist of sterile dependency, mutual entrapment ... Maybe some ritualized tragicomic bickering. And yet what is the social role of the theater? It's a date, a romantic evening! Couples come to the theater where they kind of peek, through the keyhole, into the butcher shop of their domestic lives, and then stand up and clap! If there's one thing the theater has consistently criticized, it's conventional domestic arrangements, and if there's one thing that as a social ritual it's continually reinforced—conventional domestic arrangements. The whole thing's like a parable not just of the uselessness but of the counterproductiveness of culture.

COLLEGE GIRL: Bravo! [More her own question than an interviewer's] Did you—be honest—even when you were younger, did you always sense you would be known? In your world? I'm totally editing this out, but—I've never really said this before ...

TOM: [Rising reluctantly to bait] Uh huh?

COLLEGE GIRL: I think I will be. Known. [Stops recording] I don't know why I'm saying this—maybe that's why you're a playwright? People feel comfortable talking to you, so you've learned what people talk like? But I feel like it's something you know, almost with your body. Like knowing you will or won't get sick. Seriously [Laughing] you should remember my name.

TOM: Do remind me, actually.

COLLEGE GIRL: Are you, like, pretending to be stoned?

TOM: It's just middle age. Memory peaks at twenty-eight or something.

COLLEGE GIRL: I think we need to focus.

TOM: Your focus also slips.

COLLEGE GIRL: Wah-wah. Maybe you have erectile dysfunction as well?

TOM: How funny that you of all people should think so. [They are both surprised at the remark.]



My apologies. I'm glad *that's* not on tape. That was pretty careless. But entirely facetious.

COLLEGE GIRL: I don't care if you have a hard-on.

TOM: Please, I don't have an erection.

COLLEGE GIRL: I think "hard-on" we could say on the radio, but "cock" probably not. Melanie, by the way. In case you're not kidding.

[Phone rings just once before machine picks up.]

SASHA: [Leaving message] You there? It's your exterminatrix.

COLLEGE GIRL: Wow. You guys have a landline.

TOM: She'll call back.

SASHA: I had a small idea ... Or just call me when you're done with your scene or whatever. [Hangs up]

COLLEGE GIRL: Okay, next question. [Interviewer's voice] Has the cinematic success of your most recent play altered how you approach your work?

TOM: If I actually did any work it might have.

[Protest]

## VULGAR MATERIALISM

From an online petition submitted in April to Piero Fassino, the mayor of Turin, requesting that he persuade the Spanish multinational NH Hotels not to name its new four-star location in the city after Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist theoretician and co-founder of the Communist Party of Italy. The hotel is located in the palazzo in which Gramsci lived between 1919 and 1921. Translated from the Italian by Anthony Lydgate.

We can do nothing to prevent the march of progress from making a hotel out of what ought to be a place of collective memory. But we can speak out when a name—Antonio Gramsci—falls prey to the banality of marketing and is stripped of all meaning, like Napoleon-branded cognac. We cannot allow his intense, boyish eyes and generous head of hair to become the stylized lines of a logo on a pamphlet. We cannot allow his name to plunge from the heights of proud leftist debate to the depths of chatter about hydromassage and minibars common among those who frequent luxury hotels. Nothing justifies such commercialization, least of all a "library of complete works" and a few culturally themed cocktails.

Please don't quote me on that. Are you recording this?

COLLEGE GIRL: Yes! When you *do* resume work on your play—

TOM: Never stopped. Never even slowed down [Grabs gut] How I stay fit ... But would you please get rid of any part where I imply I'm not writing a word? [COLLEGE GIRL shakes head: frustration rather than refusal.] Or maybe one word. "Buzz." All the characters say for ninety minutes ... "Buzz buzz buzz." Very avant-garde. Yet touching. Because some of them really mean it.

COLLEGE GIRL: There *was* a lot of buzz about your last play. The movie.

TOM: Okay, but first of all, it's not true that I'm not writing. And second, it's important that Sasha not know. So if you would erase—

COLLEGE GIRL: Only if you say one more thing about the theater, and the work you never for a second stop doing, and then I can go. [Flirtatious] Or I could stay for a drink. I'll show you my fake I.D. [Interviewer's voice] So what, again, is the problem with marriage? [TOM is perplexed.] Or, like, conventional domestic arrangements? That you said? I guess monogamy for one thing.

TOM: I didn't say that was a problem.

COLLEGE GIRL: Maybe you didn't have to. But what else?

TOM: [After a pause; forgetting device is recording; sincere] I think my main problem with love, at the moment, is that it seems to have become an excuse for my attempt to hide the dread and shame—if that's what they are—with which I am, on a daily basis, more or less consumed. Except I'm not consumed. I'm still here. [To fly] And so are you!

COLLEGE GIRL: You're talking to the fly.

TOM: I'm talking to all of them.

COLLEGE GIRL: I kind of like you, Tom.

TOM: Thank you for saying so. It distracted me from my self-loathing for a second. And that's the nice thing about seducing people, while you still can—

COLLEGE GIRL: Are you seducing me?

TOM: No! I mean, am I? Only you could say. I was just thinking that the nice thing about *refraining* from marriage is that you can serially convince people of your attractiveness without ever giving anybody the chance to know you well enough to ...

COLLEGE GIRL: But wait, so what is the problem with marriage, or with like—?

TOM: I don't want someone to know who I am! Least of all myself. Or second least. I especially don't want Sasha finding out. Or actually the person I'd really like to keep in the dark is our child.

COLLEGE GIRL: You didn't mention. Boy or girl?



TOM: Neither. We don't know. But there's every possibility of our having a nonretarded child who will understand everything perfectly.

COLLEGE GIRL: I think it's sweet how you have a conscience.

TOM: It's like an appendix. *[With unhappy awe]* You are very beautiful.

COLLEGE GIRL: *[Grateful, a bit frightened]* Thank you.

TOM: *[Shaking head]* Even more than what they do with their hands I hate those digital-looking compound eyes they have instead of proper human eyes.

COLLEGE GIRL: You're kidding about them right?

TOM: *[Recollecting self]* I am kidding. Don't take me seriously on marriage. I'm a comic playwright. Please do quote that.

COLLEGE GIRL: I'm interested in—you said your dread and shame.

TOM: I would dread to speak of my dread. I would be ashamed—

COLLEGE GIRL: You said yes to this interview! Or should I put in the part about how I'm beautiful and marriage is so bad?

TOM: Are you—doesn't that sound a bit like blackmail? *[COLLEGE GIRL simply looks at him.]* I don't know, what do I dread? *[Having considered it]* I guess I'm afraid either that we'll run out of oil or that we won't.

COLLEGE GIRL: You're afraid we'll either run out of oil or we won't?

TOM: Precisely. I'm also afraid that economic growth will continue, or that it will stop.

COLLEGE GIRL: Can you maybe relate this to the theater?

TOM: I wish!

COLLEGE GIRL: So what does this have to do with—?

TOM: And yet all these things are mutually involved, the— *[Gestures at flies]*

COLLEGE GIRL: I never mentioned them!

TOM: And what I see when I look out the window, what I see when I close my eyes. The terminal decline of the theater, the imminent birth of this—

COLLEGE GIRL: You think the theater is in terminal decline?

TOM: Don't you?

COLLEGE GIRL: *[Shrugging]* I never go.

TOM: *[Odd rueful cheerfulness]* But sometimes I do imagine that in the general ruin of our civilization, very simple sorts of activities, like theater, for example, very technological-primitive things—I can imagine them coming back. Little playhouses among the ruins, maybe not even a roof, just a bare rectangular spot in the grass, some stone benches ... They'll put up little playlets, between the famines and the raids. Or long plays, epic, I don't know. Anyway people will still

have their voices and bodies, won't they? When they need art? And won't they need art in the future? They won't have too much of the shit like we do, where none of it counts anymore. Maybe they'll have forgotten how to mix oil paints, they've forgotten musical notation, nobody's even heard of digital video ... But maybe it occurs to them you could put a few people—person like you, person like me—in front of a larger group of people, and they could speak, and feel, the actors, and ... And it *wouldn't* all be superfluous and null.

[Repartee]

## DISS PLACED

*From insults exchanged by children living in refugee camps near Luanda, Angola, between 2002 and 2003. "You Traded Your Mother for an Unripe Mango": Playing with Insults in an Angolan Refugee Community," by Andrew M. Guest, was published in the January/April issue of the Journal of Folklore Research. Translated from the Portuguese.*

In the time of war, you traded your mother for two tins of sardines.  
 Your father used witchcraft to steal bread from children.  
 During the time of war, someone had your father in his pocket.  
 Your father made a doll pregnant, and he ran away into the bush.  
 Your mom is the best at trying to dodge the rain.  
 Your father and your mother were playing basketball under the bed, and they were scoring in the bedpan.  
 Your father is only able to walk with crutches, but you asked him for a ride.  
 You went to register a fish as your younger brother.  
 You have a freezer in your house that works with wood but only freezes dried fish.  
 In the time of war, you used diarrhea to bake a cake for Christmas.  
 Your mother sells water in the evening, and when she sees the police she hides the water in her pubic hair.  
 Your father fought for fifteen years, hair grew on the sole of his foot, and he didn't win anything.  
 Your father has the best witchcraft in the world, but he used it to stop farting with a hammer.  
 You ate the telephone and shit hello.



COLLEGE GIRL: Great, so when civilization ends, the theater makes a comeback.

TOM: [*Forgetting self*] And in the meantime, pre-collapse, why should I let Sasha know, by writing some unwatchable play about it, how every day that I live with her in this city seems to me stained through with our extinction? And the more general extinction that we abetted? Even if that's not unwatchable, it's definitely *unoptionable*.

COLLEGE GIRL: I'm sure you have other skills.

TOM: I very nearly cannot stand it that flies—flies!—get to go strolling around over her belly, and your breasts, and my—my *mind*.

COLLEGE GIRL: There aren't that many! Seriously!

TOM: [*After a pause; calmer*] Are there really not that many?

COLLEGE GIRL: A lot of people have it worse! We could be poor. Or at war!

TOM: We are at war.

COLLEGE GIRL: Whatever. Yes. They're annoying. Mostly I listen to music. We only hear them now because we're trying to talk!

TOM: Look at you—you're quick, you're young, you're strong—and everywhere you go and will go—

COLLEGE GIRL: [*Becoming upset*] Of course they are! Why are you saying this?

TOM: So what about you? How you feel? Has anyone asked you this?

COLLEGE GIRL: Why not ask if I want to be buried alive?

TOM: [*Quietly*] I'm sorry.

COLLEGE GIRL: This is our life! I don't have to hate it! [*She smashes fly on coffee table.*] I don't care if I'm young, I'm used to it!

[*Phone rings again. Answering machine picks up.*]

SASHA: [*Leaving message*] Tom, I know you're there.

TOM: I'm sorry, she must have forgotten—

SASHA: What do I need to do for you to pick up? [*Unconvincingly*] I'm wet, Tom. I'm dripping ...

COLLEGE GIRL: Should I be listening to this?

TOM: No.

COLLEGE GIRL: Answer it!

TOM: I can't *now*.

SASHA: All right, my pussy is dry and vast as the Gobi Desert, would you pick up the phone?

TOM: This is not typical.

SASHA: Okay, remember I was going to ask. Bye. [*Hangs up*]

TOM: She's going to come home and they're going to be here.

COLLEGE GIRL: They're everywhere. That's what you were saying!

TOM: Wait, were we recording that whole time?

COLLEGE GIRL: [*Still upset, but now with some bitterness*] I remember, maybe I was fifteen, and I had this idea that there were more around me than anyone—my room seemed, like, full

of them—and I felt this fear that I was some lesser person. And I was like, No. I am important. I don't care if Mom shoos them from Rob but not me, I don't care if she hovers around Dad fanning them off like a servant. I am also ... And I feel that I am. Not just my ... [*Gestures at body*] ... And when you're known, people see you are. And I think I will be.

TOM: [*Sensing an opportunity*] You will be widely known. I'm sure of it. You're remarkable.

COLLEGE GIRL: [*Suspicious; sullen*] Remarkable how?

TOM: Ignoring your beauty, you are—you have remarkable poise, you're manifestly very smart, very ... A mark of how rare you are is that I would never talk like I did.

COLLEGE GIRL: You're not just suddenly such a fan—?

TOM: I was a fan the moment you walked in.

COLLEGE GIRL: But the moment I walked in you didn't know me!

TOM: Probably it was halfway through that I joined the fan club. You asked some very acute—

COLLEGE GIRL: You just don't want me to use the crazy parts ... What's my name?

TOM: What?

COLLEGE GIRL: What is my name? Hint: it's the same as twenty minutes ago.

TOM: I'm sorry, I'm just having one of those lapses where you—

COLLEGE GIRL: Like do you even have a guess? Karen maybe? Am I Sarah? Meghan? We sent emails.

TOM: That's why I don't remember. Because it's online. Please. We'll redo the interview. What's your availability tomorrow? I am bad with names, I'm sorry.

COLLEGE GIRL: But you're good with tits.

TOM: Excuse me?

COLLEGE GIRL: You're worried about flies on your *mind* but only worried about flies on my *breasts*. Maybe because supposedly you don't care about me you can be honest? That's disgusting. You *should* be exposed. Why do you get special treatment? Just because you're a sort of famous playwright?

TOM: But no one records and exposes normal people.

COLLEGE GIRL: Oh, so what's art supposed to do then?

TOM: You have to understand, not everything in somebody's personality fits together. I said some things. It's true. But not every lapse unlocks the whole—

COLLEGE GIRL: I'll try and just include the ones that do.

[*TOM grabs her wrist. COLLEGE GIRL shakes arm free. Leaves with digital voice recorder.*]





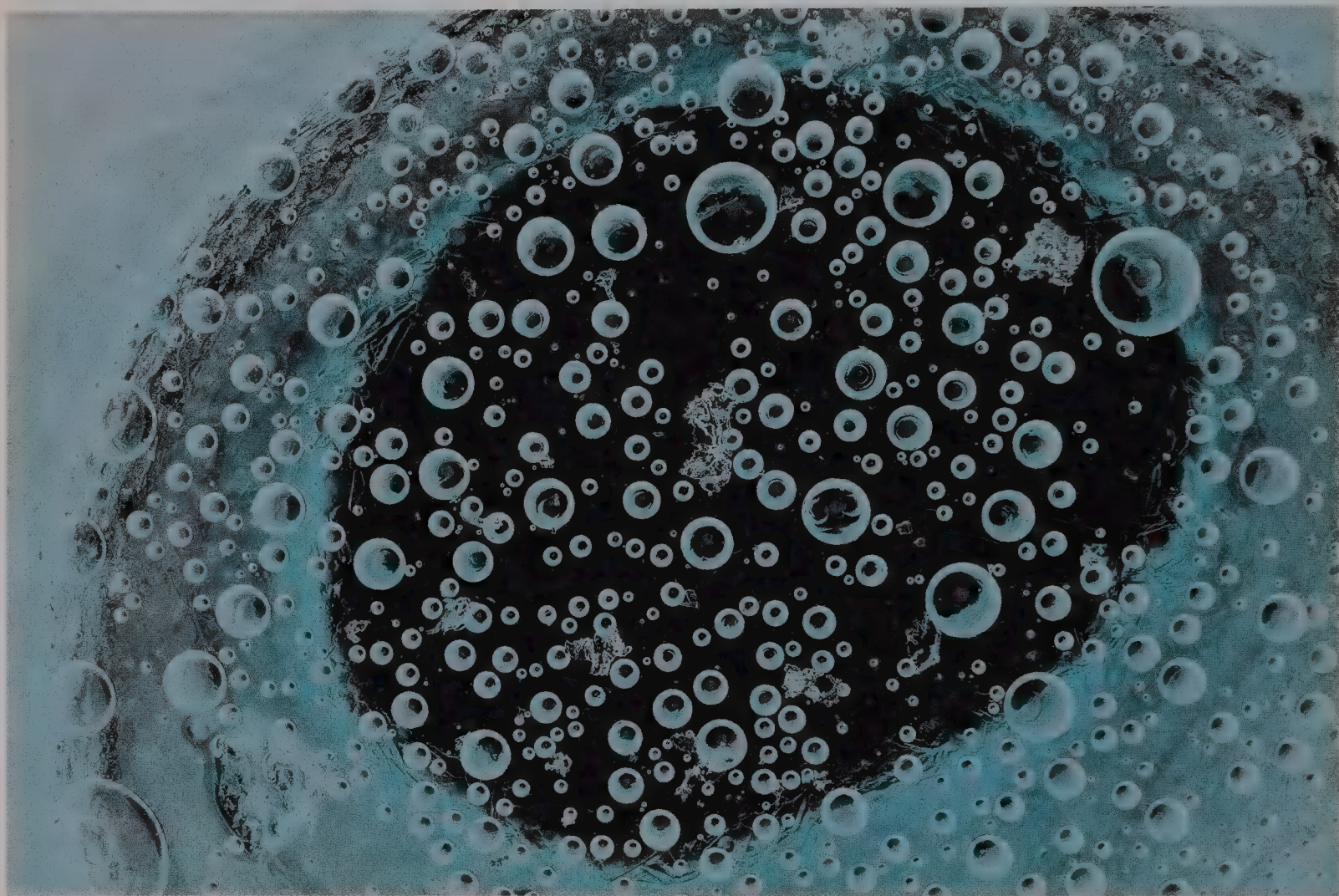
*"Tabatioca," a photo collage by Caio Reisewitz, whose work is currently on view at the International Center of Photography, in New York City.*



# PROMISES, PROMISES

Can Obama redeem his environmental failures?

By Mark Hertsgaard



**J**ohn Podesta first began advising Barack Obama in the summer of 2008, when the junior senator's improbable rise from mixed-race son of a single mother to president of the United States was acquiring a giddy sense of inevitability. Climate change

*Mark Hertsgaard is the author of six books, including, most recently, *Hot: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth*.*

was a top concern for Podesta—and, it seemed, for Obama himself. In July, a group of experts informally representing the Democratic candidate traveled to Beijing for confidential talks with Chinese officials, hoping to foster a new era of climate cooperation after eight years of obstruction on the part of the Bush Administration.

Podesta, who as White House chief

of staff had steered Bill Clinton's presidency through the impeachment crisis, soon became Obama's transition manager, helping him identify and vet prospective Cabinet members and other high-ranking officials. "I fought very hard to create a separate office [in the White House] for climate and energy," Podesta told me. And the person initially chosen to run that office—the

Bubbles of air trapped in snowstorms 5,000 to 10,000 years ago emerge from an ice sheet melting as deposits of soot and small rock particles, or cryoconite, increase heat absorption © James Balog/Aurora Photos



former EPA administrator Carol Browner—was, in Podesta's opinion, "extraordinarily well qualified."

But when I interviewed Podesta last November, he did not pretend that Obama's climate record as president had been satisfactory. Seated at his kitchen table in Washington, D.C., Podesta was dressed in running clothes; at age sixty-five, he still competes in marathons. I began by asking, "How will history judge President Obama on climate change, if history is still being written fifty years from now?"

Obama will be viewed as someone "who tried to address the challenge," replied Podesta. He was willing to take risks and expend political capital on the issue—a rare and commendable thing. "But fifty years from now, is that going to seem like enough? I think the answer to that is going to be no."

Of course, the president faced bitter opposition from the Republicans. But Podesta believed that some of Obama's top aides shared the blame for his lackluster record. "There were people inside the White House in the first two years who were not there" on climate change, he said. Their attitude was dismissive at best: "Yeah, fine, fine, fine, but it's ninth on our list of eight really important problems."

"You headed his transition team," I pointed out. "Do you feel any responsibility for helping select those people?" "Which people?"

I mentioned that Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff during Obama's first two years in office, was frequently accused of being climate non-enthusiast number one. Lawrence Summers, the president's chief economic adviser, was criticized in similar terms.

Podesta stared at me in silence, then he asked if we might speak off the record. We did. When we returned, he limited himself to noting that decisions about the economic team and its policies were "made by the president, and they were not made around the question of climate change. We were in the middle of a fiscal crisis."

What Podesta did not tell me in November—perhaps he didn't know yet—was that he would soon return to Obama's inner circle to try to salvage his climate legacy: in January, he

began serving as White House counsel. Since then, the president seems to have begun tackling the issue with renewed vigor. In his 2014 State of the Union address, he framed it as a moral imperative, pledging to "do everything we could" to leave our grandchildren "a safe, stable climate." And in June, the EPA is scheduled to announce what may be among Obama's furthest-reaching initiatives: new regulations on the greenhouse gases emitted by the nation's 1,500 power plants, historically the largest source of U.S. carbon pollution.

But Podesta seemed to realize, if only privately, that Obama had a long way to go on climate change. In November, the once and future presidential aide told me that Obama would likely go down in history as someone "who couldn't break through contemporary politics to the place we need to go."<sup>1</sup>

Obama's record on climate change is important not only for the obvious reason that everyone on earth requires a livable planet, but also because his approach to the climate issue reflects a great deal about his presidency as a whole. As much as his handling of the economy, health care, or foreign policy, it illuminates both his early promise and his subsequent shortfalls; both the victories won and the defeats suffered, the blunders committed and the mysteries begging explanation.

As I rushed to Grant Park to cover Obama's victory speech in 2008, I saw group after group of people in their twenties streaming through the streets of Chicago, their faces flushed with elation, chanting, "Yes we did!" It was the young, after all, who were largely responsible for his victory. They made up the bulk of the volunteer army that did so much—from raising record amounts of money online to registering more than 800,000 new voters—to give the nation its first African-American president.

And they did so in no small part because of what the candidate said about climate change, which polls showed was a major preoccupation of

voters under age thirty-five, regardless of party affiliation. There was the poetry of Obama pledging, on the night he clinched the Democratic Party's nomination, that this would be remembered as "the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow." More pragmatically, there was his endorsement of tough, ambitious policies, including making polluters pay for the right to emit carbon and cutting greenhouse-gas emissions by 80 percent by 2050.

When Obama took the stage in Chicago, flashing that incandescent smile and flanked by his wife and daughters, he did not disappoint his young supporters. "A planet in peril," he announced, would be one of his top three priorities. This was a first. By implicitly giving climate change equal status with the economic meltdown and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Obama was elevating it to a level of importance no previous U.S. president had granted.

So why, aside from the demands of the financial crisis, did he change course so completely? For many of his supporters, it's something of a puzzle. "It was as if the issue evaporated into thin air," said Lee Wasserman, the director of the Rockefeller Family Fund.

To be sure, Obama took some important steps to combat climate change once he was elected. He included an unprecedented \$80 billion for clean energy in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the stimulus bill that passed a month after he took office. The legislation was primarily viewed as a life preserver for a foundering economy, but as the journalist Michael Grunwald writes in *The New New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era* (2012), it was also "the biggest and most transformative energy bill in U.S. history."

"We'll look back and say, 'That was a turning point,'" Carol Browner told me. Renewable-energy executives and analysts agree. ARRA's ample investment in green technologies lowered production costs and market barriers, stimulating the extraordinary spike in wind and especially solar power over the past five years. By 2013, the cost of rooftop solar was falling so rapidly that Jon Wellinghoff, then the chair of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission,

<sup>1</sup> President Obama, through a White House spokesman, declined to comment.



was telling reporters that it was “going to overtake everything.”

There were also the tougher fuel-efficiency rules that Obama mandated when his administration rescued the failing U.S. auto industry. Gina McCarthy, who succeeded Lisa Jackson as EPA chief in 2013, told me that the new standards will produce “one of the biggest reductions in carbon pollution that this country has seen.” She put the number at about 6 billion metric tons—an amount equal to the emissions of the entire United States in 2010.

Last but not least, the White House gave its blessing to legislation cosponsored by Representatives Henry Waxman of California and Edward Markey of Massachusetts that aimed to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions through a “cap and trade” system. Obama, however, largely kept his distance from the bill, declining to give a major speech or otherwise use the bully pulpit to educate the American people about the issue. And his willingness to water down the bill was an early indication that the president would be backpedaling from his transcendent campaign promises.

**H**enry Waxman introduced the American Clean Energy and Security Act on the House floor on May 15, 2009. The bill’s endorsement of cap and trade was championed by the U.S. Climate Action Partnership (USCAP), a coalition of large corporate polluters such as General Electric and Duke Power along with three large, Washington-based conservation organizations: the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resource Defense Council, and the National Wildlife Federation.

Despite the imprimatur of these groups, the Waxman–Markey bill was much less popular with grassroots environmentalists across the country than with their Beltway counterparts. One reason for this was the complexity of cap and trade, a market-based, loophole-susceptible system that essentially turns the right to pollute into a commodity. As one activist who tried to rally support for the bill complained, “Most people don’t support cap and trade. They can’t even understand it.”

A second criticism of the Waxman–Markey bill was that it undermined the Clean Air Act—and here we encounter one of the towering ironies of Obama’s climate policy. On paper, he has all the authority he needs to slash U.S. greenhouse-gas emissions. Indeed, he has not just the authority but the *obligation* to do so, according to the Clean Air Act. The verb the act repeatedly employs is “shall”—as in “must.”

Signed into law by President Richard Nixon in December 1970, just months after 20 million Americans filled the streets on the inaugural Earth Day demanding government action, the amended Clean Air Act is arguably the most powerful and far-reaching environmental statute ever enacted in this country. It says that Americans have an absolute right to clean air—so absolute that economic considerations, such as the cost of a given pollution-abatement technology, shall play no role in the government’s decision-making. Moreover, the act explicitly states that regulations should be “technology forcing”—that is, they should push industry to go beyond its normal practices and devise new solutions that deliver the stipulated public-health benefits. That’s how Americans got catalytic converters on their cars in the 1970s, for example.

To attract enough votes to pass Waxman–Markey on Capitol Hill, however, the Obama Administration dangled the prospect of a weakened Clean Air Act. This tactic was not lost on environmental advocates. “Of course we noticed,” said Lisa Heinzerling, an EPA administrator from 2009 to 2010 and Jackson’s senior adviser on climate policy. “There was a White House strategy of using the EPA as a scary monster in the closet. If you don’t pass a cap-and-trade bill, then the EPA will regulate greenhouse-gas emissions through the Clean Air Act and [that] will be much harder and less flexible.”

Waxman–Markey eliminated the EPA’s authority under the Clean Air Act to limit greenhouse-gas emissions from a specific power plant or other major polluter. Defenders of the bill said such restrictions were substantively unimportant and politi-

cally unavoidable. After all, the bill established a nationwide limit on emissions, so it did not much matter if this or that individual facility kept polluting—such a facility’s owners would be required to pay for a corresponding amount of emissions reductions elsewhere. In any case, without such restrictions on the Clean Air Act, energy companies and their allies in Congress would simply sink the bill.<sup>2</sup>

“There were only a few instances in which Clean Air Act authority was curtailed,” Waxman told me. “Don’t restrict anything, was my position. But you have to make compromises to pass any piece of legislation.” Waxman emphasized that, under his proposal, every coal-fired power plant built in 2020 or thereafter would be required to include “carbon-capture-and-sequestration” technology—filters that would collect the plant’s greenhouse-gas emissions for storage underground, where they could not warm the atmosphere.

As the search for votes proceeded, fossil-fuel interests demanded and got giveaways that went well beyond the Clean Air Act restrictions. Obama’s earlier requirement that polluters be compelled to pay to emit carbon was largely reversed, instead granting them free allowances to continue business as usual. In addition, “cost-containment measures” were inserted that would suspend the bill’s mandates if fossil-fuel prices rose too high. What “started as a horse ended up a camel,” said Larry Schweiger, the president of the National Wildlife Federation, who ultimately withdrew his group from the USCAP coalition.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Browner argued that the Clean Air Act was far from gutted. It was under the act’s provisions, she insisted, that the Obama Administration had mandated tougher standards not only for automobile fuel efficiency but also for new power plants. “What we got on cars is huge,” Browner said. “If you buy a new car today, it’s more efficient because of President Obama.” But Kassie Siegel, the director of the Center for Biological Diversity’s Climate Law Institute, told me that the new efficiency standards fell short of what both science and law dictated—that however stringent they sounded, they were “low-hanging fruit” for an auto industry already moving in that direction.



None of this deterred industry opponents from turning Waxman–Markey into a punching bag. Dubbing the measure “cap and tax,” the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Petroleum Institute, and the ascendant Tea Party blasted it as a hideous example of Obama’s socialistic plan to demonize business and impoverish hardworking Americans.

With the help of some arm-twisting from Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, the bill squeaked through the lower chamber by a vote of 219 to 212 on June 26. But it was so discredited in the process, and its opposition grew so strong, that it never made it to the Senate floor. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid withdrew it a year later.

“The biggest shock to me,” Waxman told me, “was that we took the idea for this bill from the U.S. Climate Action Partnership, which had on its board the CEOs of major industries, [yet] the business community was so unable to influence the party that calls itself the party of business.”

When I spoke to Steven Biel, a lobbyist for the liberal advocacy group MoveOn at the time Waxman–Markey was under consideration, he lambasted the Democrats’ strategic failure. “I understand the political logic of getting the polluters on board to help push the bill through,” Biel said. “But you can’t win a political fight in which you have a strong opposition and you give away your base on day one.” Worse, he added, was that advocates of climate action were defeated not only on Capitol Hill but also on the battleground of public opinion. “On the question of whether climate change was real, man-made, and serious, we lost about twenty points during the debate—when our guy had the megaphone. That’s not supposed to happen!”

Continuing this retreat in the fall of 2009, White House officials refused to say until the last minute whether Obama would even attend, much less lead, the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009. This summit was widely described as humanity’s “last, best chance” to avoid catastrophe. The president ended up

spending a mere twenty-four hours in Copenhagen, where he delivered perhaps the worst speech of his young presidency. Flat, sour, lecturing, the tone of the address suggested a bad case of jet lag.

The content was even worse. By 2020, Obama promised, the United States would reduce its emissions by 17 percent from 2005 levels. That sounded impressive, but in fact the president was blatantly moving the goalposts. The standard base year in such comparisons, long employed by governments, scientists, journalists, and climate advocates around the world, was not 2005 but 1990. Measured from that year, Obama’s promised cuts shrank to less than 4 percent—hardly a strong enough commitment to stop the rising oceans in their tracks.

“President Obama has a way with words that works for the media, for the general public,” Richard Klein, a policy analyst at the Stockholm Environment Institute, told me after we watched the speech in Copenhagen. “But it doesn’t work for seasoned negotiators who know the ins and outs of these issues.” The ensuing talks yielded no mandatory emissions cuts or binding agreements, and the summit was widely condemned as a failure.

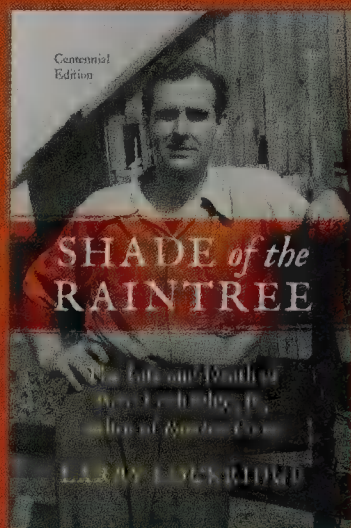
After the Copenhagen debacle, Obama went downright mute on the climate issue. He did, however, speak glowingly about his “all of the above” energy strategy. Like cap and trade, this was an idea that Republicans originated. Embracing it enabled Obama to advocate “a balanced approach”—a phrase that soon became one of the president’s favorites as he groped for compromise on federal budget deliberations, immigration reform, and other initiatives. On the one hand, such an approach meant increased support for solar, wind, and other environmentally friendly technologies in the stimulus bill. But it also meant even more generous support for oil, natural gas, and coal—or, as Obama called it, “clean coal” (a term coined by the coal industry that had as much relationship to truth as “healthy arsenic”).

A telling moment came in September 2011, when the president declared

## Shade of the Raintree

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that he had personally ordered the EPA to withdraw a proposed regulation on ground-level ozone. According to the agency, this regulation would have annually prevented as many as 12,000 premature deaths, 5,300 heart attacks, and 58,000 asthma attacks (particularly among children).

Obama attributed his decision to concern for America's struggling economy. "I have continued to underscore the importance of reducing regulatory burdens and regulatory uncertainty, particularly as our economy continues to recover," he said. Some observers suggested the move had more to do with wanting to carry coal-dependent Midwestern states in 2012. In any case, the announcement was a humiliating reversal for Lisa Jackson, who had promised to overhaul the existing ozone standard, put in place by Obama's predecessor. Jackson resigned the following year.

"Here was a decision by the Bush Administration that was illegal, based on bad science," said the former EPA administrator Lisa Heinzerling. It was also, in its reliance on projected economic effects, "bad public-health policy." A 2001 Supreme Court ruling had actually forbidden the EPA to take the costs of ambient-air-quality regulations into consideration; public health was supposed to be the sole criterion. "So if there was one standard that [the White House] should not have messed with, it was that one," said Heinzerling. The effect of the president himself overturning the regulation after EPA staff had spent two and a half years preparing it, she added, was reportedly crushing for the agency's mission and its workers' morale.

Obama's willingness to placate the energy industry also figured in one of the signature moments of his 2012 re-election bid. On March 22, he traveled to Cushing, Oklahoma, a major oil-transport hub that was the terminus for the second leg of the proposed Keystone XL, the pipeline designed to carry tar-sands crude from Alberta to the Gulf of Mexico. Standing before a huge stack of pipes, Obama bragged that "America is producing more oil today than at any time in the last

eight years." He noted that his administration had helped open up millions of acres for gas and oil exploration: "We've quadrupled the number of rigs to a record high [and] added enough new oil and gas pipeline to encircle the earth and then some."

Climate advocates were outraged. "Instead of listening to the scientists, he has embraced this balancing act that tries to please everybody," said Betsy Taylor, a philanthropic adviser and president of Breakthrough Strategies, a consulting company. "So one day [the White House's message is] better energy efficiency. The next day it's, 'Let's drill in the Arctic, now that it's melted.'"

Since winning his second term, Obama has promised, publicly and repeatedly, to resume the climate fight. Hurricane Sandy helped. The 2012 election took place a week after the storm hit much of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. Its assault on New York City in particular, the headquarters of the U.S. news media, made climate change real to many journalists who had previously disregarded it. *Bloomberg Businessweek* responded with a cover story: "It's Global Warming, Stupid." And in his first postelection news conference, Obama vowed to lead "a national conversation" about climate change.

He kicked off that conversation with his 2013 State of the Union address, in which he made clear that he would no longer wait on science-denying Republicans. "If Congress won't act soon," the president said, "I will." Five months later, in a much-touted speech at Georgetown University, Obama unveiled his Climate Action Plan. He repeated his unambitious pledge from Copenhagen to reduce emissions by 17 percent from 2005 levels, drawing applause from an audience that was clearly unaware of his goalpost-shifting techniques. He praised the EPA for announcing regulations that, as a practical matter, made the construction of new coal-fired power plants highly unlikely. (He did not mention that grassroots activists, along with the falling price of natural gas, had already achieved this goal, blocking 164 proposed coal plants by 2012—arguably the greatest climate victory

of the Obama years.) Finally, the president thrilled climate activists by vowing to approve the Keystone pipeline only if it did not "significantly exacerbate the problem of carbon pollution."

If the president does eventually approve the pipeline, "he gets an F," said Van Jones, a green-jobs adviser under Obama until an attack by Glenn Beck led him to resign in 2009. If Obama departs the Oval Office having held the pipeline at bay, "he maybe moves up to a B minus." (In April, the State Department announced that it would delay any decision on Keystone until a lawsuit regarding the pipeline's route through Nebraska is resolved.)

"I'm not ready to write him off yet," said Elijah Zarin, who as an Obama campaign worker in 2008 drafted the fund-raising emails that brought in an unprecedented flood of small-scale contributions. "I helped elect the man, and deep down I still hold out the hope he'll do it. But if he continues on the current trajectory—the 'all of the above' energy strategy—then I think history will judge [his climate policy] as one of the biggest squandered opportunities of our time."

No fair evaluation of Obama's record can ignore that he has encountered some of the most ideologically hostile, historically entrenched, and deep-pocketed opposition ever faced by an American president. In the case of climate change, however, he has faced an additional and very specific obstacle. To take action on a scale commensurate with the problem would put him on a collision course with the richest business enterprise of the modern era: the oil industry.

Big Oil's perennial sway in Washington helps explain the climate hole that the newly elected president found himself in. Under Republicans and Democrats alike, Washington had bowed for so long to the political muscle and financial inducements of the fossil-fuel industry that the United States had become by far the world's largest source of cumulative greenhouse-gas emissions. (Around the time Obama entered office, China overtook the United States as the



largest source of net *annual* emissions, but it is cumulative emissions that drive global warming.) The U.S. refusal to limit its emissions gave China and other emerging economies the perfect excuse to shun limits as well. Global emissions skyrocketed, and Obama was confronted with a climate system that was deteriorating almost as rapidly as the financial system was. (By May 2014, scientists would report that part of the West Antarctica ice sheet was “irreversibly” melting, which could cause sea levels to rise an additional four feet over the next 200 years.) To stop or even slow the disaster, Obama would have to lead a virtual U-turn in global policy.

But he would also have to overcome a central contradiction in his own climate policy. On the one hand, he has endorsed the industry-friendly “balanced approach.” On the other, he has officially committed the United States to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius above the level that prevailed before the Industrial Revolution—or, as the former NASA scientist James Hansen has written, the level at “which our civilization developed and to which life on earth is adapted.” Although media reports sometimes describe 2°C as the threshold between safe and unsafe, the latest science disputes this distinction. Britain’s Royal Society has recently concluded that such an increase would cross the threshold between a “dangerous” and an “extremely dangerous” amount of global warming. The World Bank warned in 2012 that the planet is on track for *four* degrees of temperature rise by 2100, a scenario it described as cataclysmic.

“The president says that fighting climate change is a moral obligation as well as a matter of national security and economic competitiveness,” said Michael Brune, the executive director of the Sierra Club, the nation’s largest environmental organization. “But he has an energy policy in direct conflict with all those goals.”

Mainstream research institutions, including the International Energy Agency and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, have declared that the 2°C target will require leaving at least two thirds of the earth’s remaining fossil-

fuel reserves underground. “You can’t simultaneously say we have to cut carbon pollution and then maximize the amount of carbon coming out of the ground,” said Brune. “You don’t go on a diet by shopping for more Twinkies at Safeway.”

The Obama aides I interviewed seemed unable to square the president’s energy policies with the 2°C target. John Holdren, the president’s science adviser, declined to answer the question. Carol Browner initially assured me that future historians would say Obama “made a real down payment on reducing greenhouse-gas emissions.” But asked if Obama’s actions in total, including his massive expansion of fossil-fuel production, were consistent with hitting the target, Browner paused at length. “Wow, I don’t know,” she replied in a doubting tone. “I don’t know about two degrees.”

Podesta, in our November interview, went further. Obama grasps the importance of 2°C “in an intellectual way,” he told me. The president is a “very smart guy and he studies these kinds of problems in great depth. His instinct, though, is to try to stretch but not be hysterical.” Even if fully implemented, Podesta said, Obama’s climate policy would not hit the target: “Maybe it gets you on a trajectory to three degrees, but it doesn’t get you two degrees.”

**W**hat advocates lamented most when I spoke to them about Obama’s climate record, besides his “all of the above” energy strategy, were his long periods of silence on the issue, which enabled climate-science deniers to confuse public opinion and block urgently needed government action.

“He’s been like a weak radio signal,” said James Gustave Speth, who chaired the presidential Council on Environmental Quality in the 1970s, which published the first U.S. government studies identifying global warming as a serious concern. “You hear it for brief intervals and think maybe it’ll be an interesting show,” he added back in January, “and then it fades away.”

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse expressed similar frustration. As the

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most outspoken member of Congress on the topic, the Rhode Island Democrat has delivered a climate-change-related speech on the floor of the Senate almost every single week the chamber has been in session since April 2012. I asked Whitehouse whether there had been any presidential reaction to his speeches, which numbered fifty-two by the time of our interview. “Yeah,” he said. “We got a tweet out of the administration when I did the fiftieth one.”

The senator had tried to persuade the White House that this was a winning issue. “It becomes an even more winning issue if treated with real attention. The polling data [shows] that fifty-three percent of self-designated Republicans under the age of thirty-five see climate-change denial as ignorant, out of touch, or crazy. The current stance of the Republican Party in the denial camp is not one that can survive under scrutiny.”

Tom Steyer, a billionaire Obama donor and climate activist, has tested this theory by bankrolling opponents of climate deniers in recent Senate and gubernatorial elections in Virginia and Massachusetts. His candidates—Edward Markey in Massachusetts and Terry McAuliffe in Virginia—both won. “Denying basic science is a disqualifier for high office at this point,” Steyer told me. “It may not make people oppose you, but it may make them not turn out to vote for you. You’re too ridiculous.”

And even when Obama and his advisers attempted to convey some kind of vision on climate change, they failed. Indeed, inept messaging has been one of the most pervasive, and most baffling, features of his presidency.

“I don’t think they ever paid attention to how they were going to explain this,” said Timothy Wirth, a former U.S. senator from Colorado. Wirth, who now heads the United Nations Foundation, is still perplexed by this failure. Obama, he said, was “one of the most articulate campaigners ever, but one of the least able [as president] to explain what he was doing to the broad public.”

Obama’s rhetorical retreat left the field open to his adversaries, and be-

fore his first summer in the White House was over, he had lost control of the narrative of his presidency. To the extent that Obama’s clean-energy policy was communicated at all, says Van Jones, it was “communicated by the right wing in the form of cherry picking and demagoguery about Solyndra. My understanding is that ninety to ninety-six percent of the president’s bets in clean-energy investment paid off. But all everybody hears about is Solyndra.”

“I expect that the view of history will be that President Obama was the president who did the most to combat the climate-change problem,” Representative Waxman told me. That statement is undeniably true, but it sets a very low bar. And climate change is not the only policy area in which Obama has fallen so woefully short. His record on environmental issues in general is similarly mixed, and for many of the same reasons.

On the positive side, the president has pledged to halt America’s financing of new coal plants overseas. Without billions of dollars in U.S.-backed loans, most of the plants overheating the atmosphere and punishing people’s lungs in China, India, and other developing countries would never have been built in the first place. Obama’s reversal of decades of American policy was soon emulated by the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, demonstrating that White House leadership can still influence international practices on climate change.

These and other achievements have been overshadowed, however, by Obama’s industry-friendly initiatives, many of which mimic or extend the anti-environmentalism of George W. Bush. Perhaps the most damaging policy is the least publicized: the enormous increase in coal mining on publicly owned lands that Obama’s Interior Department has encouraged, particularly in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana.

“Starting in 2010, the Bureau of Land Management began proposing new coal leases, which would have authorized more than 6.7 billion tons of new coal mining in the Powder River

Basin,” noted Pat Sweeney of the Western Organization of Resource Councils, a regional environmental group. If all that coal ends up getting mined and burned, the resulting carbon emissions alone would be sufficient to cancel out all the other climate progress Obama has made.

The Powder River Basin is only one part of a larger exploitation of public resources that began under Bush, argues Anna Aurilio, the director of the D.C. office of Environment America. “We saw a real push with the 2005 energy bill to open up much of this country to oil, fracking, coal,” Aurilio told me. “Passage of that bill led to a fire sale on leasing our public lands. Unfortunately, the Obama Administration hasn’t done much to tamp that down.”

Fracking offers a particularly vivid example of the continuities between the Bush and Obama Administrations. Under Bush’s 2005 bill, Aurilio pointed out, fracking was carefully exempted from the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. “So fracking isn’t really regulated by the EPA.”

Relieved of these statutory fetters, fracking has increased exponentially in the Obama years, notably in areas of Montana, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania that overlie shale-rich geological formations. The resulting jump in natural-gas production has slashed energy prices and boosted economic activity nationwide. But nearby residents have complained about contaminated water, and researchers have concluded that such concerns have merit.

Scientists have also challenged the climate argument made on behalf of natural gas. For years, it was portrayed as a “bridge fuel” to rely on while making the transition to a fully green energy system. After all, the methane that is released when natural gas is burned results in only half as much greenhouse-gas pollution as an equivalent amount of coal. But studies by scientists such as Anthony Ingraffea, a Cornell University professor who spent the first thirty years of his career advising oil and gas companies, have diminished this argument. They document the many



leaks in the infrastructure that brings natural gas into America's homes and businesses. When these pervasive leaks are taken into account, natural gas's climate advantage dwindles, perhaps to the vanishing point.

Yet President Obama has consistently championed natural gas as a vital component of his energy strategy. In his 2014 State of the Union address, he called it "a bridge fuel" to a clean energy future. The president was careful, though, not to utter the *F* word, despite the fact that a vast expansion of fracking is the only way to produce as much gas as his vision requires.

The EPA's Gina McCarthy told me that the Obama Administration would soon unveil a new strategy for limiting methane leakage, which it did in March. "There are very clear technologies available that can address that," she said. "We think it's another opportunity for us to work with those industry sectors and drive methane emissions down."

But it is the president's perpetual eagerness to "work with those industry sectors" on environmental matters that reminds Eric Schaeffer, former director of the EPA's Office of Regulatory Enforcement, of Obama's predecessor. Schaeffer resigned in 2002, charging that the Bush White House "seems determined to weaken the rules we are trying to enforce." A key culprit was the Office of Management and Budget, which often overruled environmental regulations because of their supposedly negative economic implications. Schaeffer, who now heads the nonprofit Environmental Integrity Project, told me that Obama's OMB is as bad as Bush's. Its officials still see "their primary job as killing regulations on the environment." Obama's withdrawal of the ground-level-ozone regulation—a withdrawal one OMB official, Cass Sunstein, advocated—was only the most overt example, Schaeffer said.

Besieged by pressure from industry and its favored lawmakers on Capitol Hill, and lacking strong backing from the White House, the EPA under Obama has seldom seemed committed, Schaeffer told me. He noted that the agency has been circulating for public comment a draft strategic vision for its future.

"Traditionally, the goal of the EPA has been to get the nation's rivers and streams in 'a fishable and swimmable condition,'" Schaeffer explained. "In the draft, the EPA says that in 2006, scientific assessments done by the states found that forty-two percent of America's rivers and streams were in poor condition." The draft then sets a goal for 2018: Don't let things get any worse. "Really? That's it? I mean, what happened to fishable and swimmable?"

Obama's shortcomings on climate change illustrate one of the basic truths of American politics: No president can bring about fundamental change—change that challenges the prerogatives of wealth and power—unless he or she is aided and pushed by vigorous, organized, and sustained popular pressure and protest.

This is especially true of the climate issue, for Obama has presided over a nation that qualifies (but is rarely described) as a petrostate. "The United States is as much of an OPEC nation as most OPEC nations are," Everett Ehrlich, an undersecretary of commerce in the Clinton Administration, told me.

Ehrlich, who chaired Clinton's interagency deliberations on the economics of climate change, was explaining why an administration that boasted Al Gore as vice president had been much more timid about reducing greenhouse-gas emissions than had the industrial economies of Europe and Japan. "The U.S. is more like an energy producer, while the Europeans and Japan are energy-consumer nations," he said. "Our natural-resource industries are very powerful and their executives saw dealing with climate change as punitive to their interests. We heard about it repeatedly from them."

Saying no to Big Oil is never simple. The record suggests that Obama is at least intermittently willing to do so: calling for the repeal of the industry's \$4.5 billion in annual tax breaks, as Obama has (unsuccessfully) urged year in and year out since becoming president, is like waving a red flag at the likes of Chevron and Shell. The record further suggests that Obama has genuinely wanted to

achieve a breakthrough on climate change. He hasn't gotten it done in part because he hasn't known how, making poor hiring and strategic choices and allowing the perceived requirements of winning reelection take precedence over rallying the American people around a vision of what is right.

But Obama is nothing if not persistent. And as he enters the final phase of his presidency, he seems determined to take another shot at climate change. Why else would he bring Podesta back to the White House to focus the executive branch on the problem, including the pursuit of a major deal with China?

To accomplish all that needs doing—to preserve a livable planet—will require the kind of leadership that Obama promised back in 2008. "The transformational presidents in U.S. history all stepped up to defeat the entrenched interests of their time and usher in a new national era," said Wasserman of the Rockefeller Family Fund. "All of them—whether it was FDR mobilizing the public to fight fascism, or Teddy Roosevelt taking on the crushing economic power of the trusts, or Lincoln fighting a civil war to end slavery—defeated the interests by grabbing the moral high ground and capturing the public's imagination."

But each of these transformational presidents also had to be prodded by an engaged citizenry. Elijah Zarlin, the former campaign worker, noted that more than 95,000 people have signed up to occupy construction sites and block bulldozers to keep the Keystone XL from being built. The outpouring of popular resistance to Keystone is the only reason the State Department didn't approve the pipeline years ago, said Zarlin, who argued that this engaged citizenry remains ready and eager to play its part.

"These are his people," said Zarlin. "They are still ready to do big things if they're asked to do big things. He needs to find his fire, and people will get behind him. But he's certainly not there yet. And if he keeps up what he's been doing, he's not going to get there." ■



# THE MAN WHO STOLE THE NILE

An Ethiopian billionaire's outrageous land grab

By Frederick Kaufman



Forget about diamond heists, bank robberies, and drilling into the golden intestines of Fort Knox. In this precarious world-historic moment, food has become the most valuable asset of them all—and a billionaire from Ethiopia named Mohammed Hussein Al Amoudi is getting his hands on as much of it as possible, flying it over the heads of his starving countrymen, and selling the trea-

sure to Saudi Arabia. Last year, Al Amoudi, whom most Ethiopians call the Sheikh, exported a million tons of rice, about seventy pounds for every Saudi citizen. The scene of the great grain robbery was Gambella, a bog the size of Belgium in Ethiopia's southwest whose rivers feed the Nile.

I wanted to get to Gambella to see the Sheikh's plan in action. A friend of mine at the State Department suggested I contact a fixer she knew once I got to Addis Ababa. When I met Aman on my second morning there, he looked the part—blue jeans, black

button-down, pin-striped jacket, dark glasses. (He asked that I not use his real name for fear of retaliation by Al Amoudi.) The backstory was good, too: Aman had been raised a devout Muslim but had grown out of religion. Now he was a writer, an editor, and an entrepreneur; his résumé included a year at an English-language business weekly, where he had been schooled in the ways of Ethiopian banking, manufacturing, and real estate. Plus, he knew Fikru Desalegn.

Fikru, explained Aman, ran the Sheikh's rice operation in Gambella,

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otherwise known as Saudi Star farm. Fikru could get us onto the farm. Where, I asked, could we find Fikru?

"He's in town," said Aman.

We were speeding past Meskel Square in his black subcompact, cutting between the mule carts, charcoal sellers, and groups of beggars. I figured we were heading straight to Fikru's office for an interview, but Aman pulled into the muddy parking lot of Ethiopia's Ministry of Agriculture, a six-story concrete relic of the country's sixteen years of communist rule, which ended in 1991.

We walked up the ministry's marble stairs to the fourth floor, home of the Agricultural Investment Support Directorate. Aman had made an appointment to discuss Sheikh Al Amoudi with the bureau's director, Esayas Kebede, but after announcing our presence in Amharic he reported back in English that unfortunately Esayas Kebede was in a meeting somewhere else.

As we waited, I read a pamphlet, *Ethiopia: The Gifted Land of Agricultural Investment*. The government owns all the land in Ethiopia. They cannot sell it, but they can lease as much of it as they want. By leasing to the Sheikh, the directorate had given Al Amoudi's food grab the federal stamp of approval. Though the terms of the deal have never been released, the annual price per hectare has been estimated at no more than seven dollars. In Zambia, by comparison, the average hectare leases for about \$1,250 a year.

The sun was low in the sky when Esayas arrived, and without looking up from his BlackBerry he led us into a small conference room. I wanted to ask him why the bureau had given the Sheikh preferential treatment, figuring he would reveal a few things I could use when I talked to Fikru. But before I could begin, Esayas launched into a speech. Agriculture accounted for 42 percent of Ethiopia's GDP, he said. More than four out of five people work the land, and Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plan, introduced in 2009, had laid out a five-year strategy for the country's farmers.

I asked whether the politicians behind this plan considered it unusual

that Ethiopia, where 30 million of 90 million people are undernourished, would soon feed Saudi Arabia, where there was no particular lack of food.

"Ethiopia's land can feed all the African people," said Esayas, "and more than that."

Since becoming director, Esayas had done a fair bit of public speaking, which had taken him from Beijing to New Delhi to Hyderabad. He was not about to go off script. "Investment is a win-win," he said. "Our job is to change Ethiopia from an aid destination to an investment destination."

But how could Ethiopia feed the world if Ethiopia could not feed itself?

"The core point," said Esayas, "is *water development*."

Of all the stories and subterfuges, this was the most hackneyed. I didn't care about Nile water and its source. I wasn't interested in Henry Morton Stanley, David Livingstone, John Hanning Speke, or any of the other dead Victorian explorers, no matter how many specials PBS and the BBC made about them. On TV, in print, online—every story was a water story, but I was not about to turn my attention away from the Sheikh's rice.

Esayas was looking at his BlackBerry.

I asked how he could allow Ethiopia to prostitute its food supply.

Esayas stood up, headed out the door of the conference room—then stopped, turned around, and gave me a bit of advice. "Write what you see," he said. "Don't write what you feel."

**I**t was dark by the time we were done with Esayas. Aman drove through a slum toward a shining castle atop a hill, the home of African Union summits and Microsoft press conferences. This was the Sheraton Addis, owned by Al Amoudi and built on the site of a bulldozed shantytown. After construction was completed, the Sheikh laid waste another 3,000 homes to expand the hotel and improve the view from the pool.

I asked whether we would see Fikru at the hotel.

"Maybe," said Aman.

"Do we have an appointment with Fikru?"

"Tomorrow."

Guards armed with AK-47s waved us through the wrought-iron front gates into a world of delight: flowers, fountains, palm trees, mowed lawns, street lamps, and British-style red telephone boxes. In front of the entrance was a statue of a horse rearing up on his hind legs, so the weary traveler could gaze upon his silver penis. Staff in top hats and tails stood at attention under the arches of a grand arcade. But the effect was marred a few yards beyond the glittering vaults and cupolas, where we found three airport scanners—two for people, the other for luggage. One of Cinderella's coachmen gave me a thorough frisk.

Aman had assured me that the Sheraton would be worth our while, that with a little luck we would run into some Saudi Star executives just in from the rice farm. So we walked down a golden hallway to Stanley's, a bar of the dark-wood-and-brass variety, hung with sepia images of African princes, African explorers, and the cataracts of the Nile.

Aman stopped to pay his respects to two men. While he spoke to them I settled onto a stool at the opposite end of the bar and tried to decide among twenty-two varieties of vodka and thirty-one kinds of scotch. I considered a *croque monsieur* and Buffalo wings along with a glass of 1925 Armagnac, but settled instead on a couple of locally brewed St. George beers.

When Aman sat down he explained that one of the men owned a number of buildings in downtown Addis and the other was a politician from the northern region of Tigray, home base of the ethnic group that has ruled Ethiopia since the country's 1991 coup. Aman told me the politician was known around Addis as Money Man.

A couple of rounds later there were still only the four of us at Stanley's, so we stood and headed for the door. On our way out, Aman introduced me. Money Man had bloodshot eyes and a nasty scar on his forehead. He shook my hand and asked what I was doing in Addis. I told him I was a reporter.

What was I reporting?

I said I planned to visit Gambella and report on Saudi Star farm.

"Inform the public correctly," he said.



"Of course," I said.

He took a sip of red wine and stared at me. I supposed he could deliver me to the Sheikh's farm with a wave of his pudgy, gold-ringed finger—but first he would have to let go of my hand, which he would not do.

He studied my face, then turned to Aman, grabbed his beard, pulled him close, and whispered in his ear.

When we got back to the car, Aman sat for a while with the lights off.

"You're scared," I said.

He turned the ignition.

"Of course."

**T**he next morning, over a breakfast of cappuccino and *chechebsa*—strips of fried bread sprinkled with *berbere*, a spice mixture containing red chili, garlic, and an herbal laxative known locally as *korarima*—Aman wanted to talk about gold. He told me that the Sheikh had his hands on a mine 300 miles south of Addis that produced just under five tons of ore every year. He refined this in Switzerland, then sold the bars to Germany's Commerzbank.

Al Amoudi was then the world's sixty-first-richest man, with assets of more than \$12 billion. And now, Aman said, his geologists had discovered gold deposits elsewhere in Ethiopia that would yield an additional ten tons a year for the next half century. The new trove would raise the Sheikh's fortune by \$4 billion.

"I thought the Sheikh was interested in food," I said.

Aman just stared at me.

We sat in silence and chewed our *chechebsa*. Whether or not there was reason to fear the Sheikh and his thugs, Aman clearly did not want to visit Gambella, where there was nothing but heat, humidity, tractors, and experimental paddies of basmati rice. And then there was Money Man, who might have muttered to Aman that I should be dissuaded from poking around Saudi Star farm. Gold had diverted many a past explorer. Why not this one?

After breakfast we headed downtown toward the MIDROC building, headquarters of the Sheikh's Ethiopian enterprises. Mohammed Al Amoudi founded the Mohammed International Development Research and Orga-

nization Companies in 1994, and although the firm had a great deal invested in food, it also manufactured nails, fluid packs for IVs, and much more. One MIDROC subsidiary produced 29 million corrugated boxes a year. MIDROC's detergent plant spewed forth eight tons of laundry soap each hour. The Sheikh had a leather business, a particle-board business, a dairy business, a supermarket chain, and a cement factory—all of this in addition to his airline and travel agency, his Pepsi bottling plants and Chevrolet dealerships, and, of course, MIDROC Gold.

I assumed that Fikru and the offices for Saudi Star farm were in the MIDROC building, but Aman drove by without stopping. The farm's corporate headquarters had yet to move into the Sheikh's skyscraper, he said.

Fifteen minutes later he parked in a puddle of mud and we made our way through a herd of sheep. The road—or, more accurately, the busted rock and bits of broken pavement—was dotted with their crap.

"My city," said Aman, "which I don't like anymore."

We entered the gray concrete six-story premises of Saudi Star farm, a clone of the Ministry of Agriculture: Soviet construction, circa 1984. The waiting room featured stained carpets, twisted blinds, exposed wiring, a dying houseplant, and flickering fluorescent lights. Aman checked his Samsung, then broke the news. Unfortunately, Fikru Desalegn would not be available for an interview.

Nor would his second-in-command.

However, Aman said, there was a midlevel manager who happened to be in the building, a civil engineer involved in operations. He had ten minutes for us in the conference room next door, and his name was Yitagas.

Yitagas turned out to be a humorless young man with a nothing-but-the-facts manner: The farm employed five site managers. The farm had brought in 410 farm machines. The farm was constructing a geomembrane.

What, I asked, was a geomembrane?

Yitagas gave me a look. "The core point," he said, "is *water development*."

Clearly, Yitagas had been given the same script as Esayas, which I imagined

had been written by Fikru, perhaps under the supervision of the Sheikh. Unfortunately, there was no room for improvisation. So I told Yitagas that yes, I had come to his country to witness the water development.

I had yet to become accustomed to the protracted silences that punctuate Ethiopian conversation, so when Yitagas leaned back in his chair to check his handheld I assumed our meeting had come to an end. I closed my notebook and stood, at which point Yitagas looked up from his screen and said that he was flying to Gambella the next day and there might still be a few tickets available. If there were, he would be happy to put us up at Saudi Star farm.

Aman sat poker-faced.

"That's too kind," I said.

**T**he Sheikh's rice theft could only have been possible in a part of the world no one identifies with rice.

When Alexander the Great came to Luxor he did not ask about the meager harvests that had led to the downfall of the empire of the pharaohs, nor did he inquire about the sphinxes, the murals, or the colonnades. He asked instead about the source of the Nile, and why it rose every summer. Four hundred years later, the Romans sent two centurions to discover the answer to the water question—which they never did.

Meles Zenawi, prime minister of Ethiopia from 1995 until his death, in 2012, knew where the Nile came from. He knew the secret of the river's annual rise, knew why life came to the desert in the hottest months of the year. The 5,000-year-old mystery turned out to have a simple answer: The rainy season in Ethiopia begins in June and ends in September, and more than four fifths of the Nile's water comes from the country.

Zenawi understood that the Horn of Africa could be mastered by controlling the deluge that crashed down from his country's highland plateau. Hydro-hegemony could even mean a return of Aksum, an Ethiopian kingdom that overran Arabia, pushing up against the empires of China and Europe—in the first millennium A.D.

And so Zenawi spent a great deal of his political career planning and fi-



nancing and constructing dams to manage the flow of water from Ethiopia to Eritrea, from Ethiopia to Djibouti, from Ethiopia to Kenya, and from Ethiopia to Somalia. He knew that 77 percent of East African city dwellers had no access to electricity; Ethiopia's rivers could light a swath of earth two thirds the size of Europe. Ethiopia would share the global energy stage with the United States, Russia, China, and the Arab states. And whenever Ethiopia wanted, it could turn off the lights.

Zenawi's dream could also settle old scores. First among resentments: Egypt, a country that has the right to use three quarters of the Nile's water but contributes nothing to the flow. Of all the water developments envisioned by Zenawi, the greatest was Project X, a dam that would impound the Blue Nile.

The proposed Project X dam flouted a compact that dated to 1959 whereby Egypt and Sudan were granted the rights to Nile water—with none for anyone else. Not surprisingly, neither Egypt nor Sudan would invest in the \$4.7 billion scheme.

"Unfortunately," Zenawi said in April 2011, "the necessary climate for engagement, based on equitable and constructive self-interest, does not exist at the moment." He then announced that his country would fund Project X on its own, and that Project X would no longer be known as Project X but as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Of course, Zenawi would fail, as all the other Nile fools had failed. Egypt would never let him stop the flow; Zenawi's speech was merely political grandstanding. And a little more than a year later, he contracted a mysterious illness and died. Among the Chinese, Indian, and U.S. dignitaries, the African presidents, and the Ethiopian Orthodox clergymen who attended the funeral in Addis Ababa, Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Al Amoudi held a place of honor.

Aman and I arrived at the airport at nine A.M., three hours before the flight to Gambella. Our punctuality turned out to be wise, as the line outside the airport stretched into the



parking lot. But beyond the security checkpoint the airport turned out to be deserted, and as far as I could tell the only departure that day was our twin prop to the swamp.

The gate was a merry spot, a mini-reunion for Yitagas, Saudi Star execs, and the dozen or so Nuer men who were heading home.<sup>1</sup>

Aman and I nodded hello to Yitagas, then Aman introduced me to a former editor of the weekly newspaper where he used to work. I was curious to know what story the editor was covering in Gambella, but it turned out he no longer worked as a journalist. He was now employed by a British risk-management company that helped businesses operate in

<sup>1</sup> The Nuer are the largest ethnic group in Gambella, though most still live in South Sudan. Tens of thousands crossed the Baro River into Gambella at the height of the Second Sudanese Civil War and eventually claimed Ethiopian citizenship.

complex and hostile environments. I was about to ask what clients the company had in Gambella, but the time had come to board.

The city of Addis Ababa stands at an altitude of about 8,000 feet, so it felt like most of our flight was spent descending. After an hour in the air I could see the Baro snaking its way through the fen, the largest waterway amid a thicket of streams and courses that hydrologists call the Baro-Akobo River Basin. The fluvial lacework eventually forms a border with South Sudan, where the Ethiopian tributaries congregate and become the Sobat—which a few hundred miles downstream feeds a section of the White Nile known as the Bahr al Jabal, or River of the Mountain.

We touched down not far from Gambella town, the capital of the region. An airfield had been hacked out of the forest, and ranks of Sudan



grass grew thick alongside the tarmac. It was now late afternoon, but heat still penetrated the corrugated-metal shack where our bags had been dropped on a slab of poured concrete. The dirt around the airport shack was crowded with black four-by-fours and white pickups stenciled with the initials and insignia of the International Organization for Migration, the World Food Programme, the Red Cross, and various branches of the United Nations, most prominent among them the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees.<sup>2</sup>

Aman introduced me to the driver he had conscripted to take us to the farm. Teddy wore shorts and Pumas and drove a gold Nissan Patrol. He had strapped two spare tires and three twenty-seven-liter containers of gasoline to the roof; filling stations were scarce in the region.

We stopped beside Yitagas and waited for four jeeps full of soldiers, who would join us on our journey. They pulled in front of us, aimed their rifles at the jungle on either side of the road, and then our convoy roared off past the twisted trees and cell phone towers.

"You can't believe how green this place is," said Aman. "It's like Iowa." He had once been to Des Moines, on a reporting tour for a pan-African news agency.

After an hour or so on the empty dirt road, we had managed to rumble about twenty miles south of the airport. We began to pass men with machetes on their waists and pickaxes on their shoulders, some carrying huge bundles of sticks on their heads, others lugging water. After another mile we arrived at a village called Abobo, where we saw a few stalls with bags of rice for sale. We would have driven by without stopping, but a herd of goats had congregated in the middle of the road. As our little convoy came to a halt, the people

gathered round. The villagers were Anuak, members of the second-largest ethnic group in Gambella.

Recently, the Anuak had attracted the attention of Genocide Watch, which characterized the Ethiopian government's approach to the group as a "campaign of genocidal violence" that had forced between 6,000 and 8,000 people to flee Ethiopia for the relative safety of Sudan. Six months before I arrived in Ethiopia, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a Gambella town bus and killed nineteen people. A month later, another group of unidentified gunmen invaded the Sheikh's rice farm and killed two Pakistanis and three Ethiopians. The government suspected that Anuak employees of Saudi Star had been complicit in the raid, so the next day soldiers arrived and killed four of them. According to Human Rights Watch, federal troops then descended on the neighboring Anuak villages and searched the houses, arrested the men, and raped the women.

After the goatherds had cleared the road the soldiers relaxed and Teddy followed Yitagas and his caravan west toward the border with South Sudan. An hour later we came to a barbed-wire fence, then passed a sign in Amharic and English, barely visible among the jungle vines, for Saudi Star farm. We drove another half hour before we passed our first vehicle traveling in the opposite direction, a pickup packed with day laborers. Soon after that we arrived at a checkpoint, where two guards pointed their rifles at us—then recognized Yitagas. They unlocked the gate and as dusk fell we pulled into the central compound of Saudi Star farm.

"Hallelujah," said Aman.

**S**audi Star's headquarters looked like it belonged to a Bond villain, a tractor-flattened landscape filled with klieg lights, satellite dishes, and rows of white barracks. Men in robes and long beards wandered about—Pakistani rice technicians.

"Who built all this?" I asked.

"A contractor from Dubai," said Yitagas.

What contractor?

"A brother of the Sheikh," said Yitagas.

He led the way to the biggest barracks, a double-wide trailer with an air-conditioned conference room. Someone had taped a schematic of the farm to one wall. An engineer began to explain the intricacies of a 10,000-hectare tract that had been divided and subdivided into sectors and subsectors, each labeled with a name such as BC2/DY6-6/IL.

By the time the explanation was over more than twenty Ethiopians had arrayed themselves around a plastic table. Yitagas settled himself at the head and indicated that Aman and I should sit opposite him. He started the meeting on a grand note.

"Welcome to where the wind starts," he said.

As if on cue lightning flashed outside the window, illuminating the red smoke of the jungle, which was being cleared by fire. The night crews were out, bulldozing more of the Sheikh's land.

Yitagas sipped a glass of mango juice. "Have a beer," he said, and the room of Ethiopians watched in silence as a young girl in sandals produced two St. Georges and set them in front of Aman and me. I worried that Yitagas had grown suspicious—most likely after consultation with the elusive Fikru. Now that I was here, he saw the risk I could pose. So, like Aman, he tried to turn my attention away from the rice. Yitagas noted that only a hundred kilometers from where we sat we could observe native Gambellans living in picturesque villages, undisturbed by modernity. Why not head over there in the morning? Why, Yitagas continued, wouldn't I contemplate a visit to the smoking waters of Blue Nile Falls, where millions of gallons cascade over cliffs and circular rainbows adorn the skies for tourists to enjoy?

I said I liked Gambella.

"Why do you like Gambella?" asked Yitagas. "Because it is hot?"

The Ethiopians thought this was a fabulous joke. I knocked back the rest of the St. George, told Yitagas we would see him in the morning, and walked out.

Aman and I had been told to eat dinner with the Pakistanis, so we

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations keeps busy in Gambella, where members of the Anuak, Komo, Majangir, Nuer, and Opo ethnic groups contend for land and resources. There are also highland immigrants from the Ethiopian regions of Amhara, Tigray, and Oromia, 50,000 refugees from South Sudan, and a miscellany of asylum seekers from Uganda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.



hurried over to their barracks and joined them around a flatscreen television that piped in the news from Peshawar. The rice, pumpkin, lentils, chapati, and pineapple pudding were surprisingly good.

As we lingered over glasses of mint tea I learned that while Saudi Star's first rice harvest had been plentiful, the plants had reached maturity just as flocks of migratory birds swooped across the Horn of Africa. The birds had eaten nine tenths of the Sheikh's crop; the team had had to start over. The debacle was discussed openly as a failure, for it was easily remedied: rice can grow almost any month of the year in Gambella. Next time the rice would be ready when the birds were flying over some other country.

After dinner I retired to my one-room trailer, where I found the plasti-wood floor was warped, mud-stained, and inhabited by throngs of fat black beetles. When I lay down on my cot the bugs crawled into bed with me.

To everyone's surprise, in April 2011, the Ethiopian government began excavating the site for the Grand Renaissance Dam and poured the first phases of the concrete structure. Two years later, Ethiopia diverted the Blue Nile 600 yards from its natural course and Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi convened a secret meeting in Cairo. Unfortunately, someone forgot to turn off the television feed, so Morsi's conclave was broadcast live throughout Egypt.

As all of Cairo watched in disbelief, Egypt's political elite sat around a conference table and pondered their options. Younis Makhyou, leader of an ultraconservative Islamist party, suggested that Egypt back rebel groups in Ethiopia. "We can communicate with them and use them as a bargaining chip against the Ethiopian government," he said. "If this fails, then there is no choice but to use intelligence to destroy the dam."

Ayman Nour, head of the liberal El Ghad party, proposed that Egypt spread a rumor that its military was about to purchase refueling aircraft—thereby creating the impression that Egypt was planning an air strike to destroy the

dam. "This could yield results on the diplomatic track," noted Nour.

Magdy Hussein, another Islamist politician, disagreed. Hussein warned that talk of military action would only turn the Ethiopians into Egypt's enemies. Open conflict was a bad idea; Hussein suggested organizing a film festival in Addis instead.

Afterward, President Morsi made a public declaration: "We cannot let even one drop of Nile water be affected," he said. "If it diminishes by one drop, then our blood is the alternative." *Daily News Egypt* reported that some Egyptian politicians considered Morsi's statement "a declaration of war."

One Sudanese secession and one (more) Egyptian coup d'état later, threats and counterthreats over the dam continued. "We will not negotiate on this issue," the head of Ethiopia's Boundary and Transboundary Rivers Affairs Directorate declared earlier this year, to which Egypt's Irrigation Minister retaliated, "We have exhausted all opportunities to negotiate with Ethiopia."

When the sun rose I opened the trailer door to gusts of swamp air laced with the stink of diesel and pesticide. The orange night sky had turned to white haze as the burning of Gambella continued. Row after row of metal prefab sheds shimmered beneath the sun, along with dozens of black Toyota pickups, acres of bare dirt, and miles of barbed wire. Anuak day laborers were already lugging barrels of fuel and water around camp and picking through a low mound of what was left of the pilot-study rice. At last I could investigate the Sheikh's land grab at the scene of the crime.

Yitagas met us after breakfast and introduced me to a heavyset project manager named Deribew Shanko who wore khakis and a pink shirt—an Ethiopian preppy with a walkie-talkie and a brother who drove a cab in Washington, D.C. We packed into Teddy's four-by-four and followed a dirt road that soon narrowed to a single lane between screens of jungle grass. I listened as Deribew laid out the details of an extraordinarily complex irrigation system, but eventually

stopped taking notes on flow divisions and field turnouts. I stared out the window at the yellow-billed marabou storks that scanned the tractored fields for carrion.

"The birds are big," said Deribew. "They can swallow the head of a sheep."

Why, I asked, were there so few trees?

"They must all be destroyed," said Deribew. "They are home for birds."

We stopped near a ditch where men in hard hats were constructing a trough of reinforced concrete. Deribew explained that this would become a storm drain, there to protect the irrigation system from flash floods, a way to keep the water from the water.

I noted that there was already a good deal of water at the bottom of the ditch.

"This is not from our dam," said Deribew. "That is from God."

A little while later we pulled up to an enormous cement mixer. Because of the heat the barrel had to be wrapped in muslin and continually soaked by a hose from a water truck. We got out of the car and watched the aggregate from the mixer stream through a black rubber tube that spewed the cement up the walls of a plastic lining that had been stapled to the sides of the ditch. This was the geomembrane, which had arrived from Dubai in one-millimeter-thick sheets. It stretched to the horizon in both directions.

The lining would ensure that no water would seep from Saudi Star's canals back into the red earth of Gambella. Any water that entered the system would either evaporate or wind up in a desert more than a thousand miles to the northeast—embedded in the grains of rice.

Deribew introduced me to the geomembrane engineer, a mud-caked Pakistani who motioned to me surreptitiously as soon as Deribew turned around. Sweat poured down his face as he gazed across the wet concrete to the jungle, where spear grass shot up ten feet.

"It is dangerous here," he told me.

I did not know whether he was referring to the rapes and murders reported by Genocide Watch or something new.



"People have been killed," he said.

"Can you tell me," I began—but Deribew had returned to my side.

"Not many Americans around here," I said to no one in particular.

"They are not hard workers," said Deribew, and he laughed.

We walked over to one of the pilot rice paddies.

"How much water does that take?" I asked.

"Like a pond," said Deribew. "It soaks for three or four days. Then they drill the seed, then they fill the field again with water."

I asked, "Is there a crop that uses more water than rice?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Deribew.

"Isn't it ironic that rice uses more water—but is most popular in the desert?" asked Aman.

Deribew said nothing.

Which was when I realized that my food story had become a water story after all. The Grand Renaissance Dam was a distraction: even if Ethiopia managed to build it, the dam would not change the flow of water to Egypt. But, grain by grain, the rice from Saudi Star farm would. The Sheikh had solved the fatal riddle. The policy he and his cronies proudly trumpeted—*water development*—would allow him to acquire what Meles Zenawi only dreamed of having: the Nile.

The hydrological consequences would be astounding. Each acre of rice requires a million gallons of water a season, which means the Sheikh's project could eventually suck more than a trillion gallons from the Nile. From November to February, the farm would extract more than 10 percent of the White Nile's total flow. In a dry year, even more.

Saudi Star farm was a different story from the one I had come to report, and for the first time since I arrived in Ethiopia, I was more nervous than Aman.

"When's the next flight to Addis?" I asked.

**O**n the way back to Gambella town, Aman said a few words in Amharic and Teddy pulled up alongside a river that stretched a quarter mile wide. This was the Baro. We got out of the car and hiked to a

grove of mango trees, where Anuak and Nuer men sat together in the shade, along with refugees from the north and nomads from the west and transients from who knew where. Those who were not sleeping chatted over glasses of peanut-butter tea and chewed khat.

Ethiopia is the khat capital of the world, and the business is worth hundreds of millions of dollars. It's also one of the few Ethiopian commodities Mohammed Al Amoudi does not control. Chewing the oily green leaves is known to induce mild euphoria and can soothe the nerves. Aman bought a bundle and distributed it among us.

On either side of the river, seeds sprouted from the dark silt—just as they had for thousands of years from Luxor to Giza. "They never irrigated," said Aman, whose tongue had turned green. "They watched the water pass by." Then he told me that the Amharic name for the Nile was Abai, which means "betrayal."

At the airport we found the same group going back to Addis that we had encountered heading out to Gambella, including the ex-editor now employed by the British risk-management group. He asked why I had come to Gambella, so I told him my plan to write about Mohammed Al Amoudi.

"He is a thief," he said.

"I take it you are off the record."

"On the record," he said. "The Sheikh—he owes two hundred eighty-five million dollars. Debt he didn't pay. He borrowed two hundred sixty-three million from the government to pay for the Sheraton. That was the total cost, by the way. Now I work this bullshit for the British."

"Who's the client in Gambella?" I asked.

"The company doesn't allow me to know who the client is," he said. "But I know."

"Are you working for the Sheikh?" I asked. He pulled me away from the crowd and held my shoulders. His one good eye spun from one corner of the hangar to the other. "Feel my heart," he said, and pushed my palm to his chest. Then he began to shout in my face. "If they want to kill me, I'm ready! They can come and get me! It is better than dying by silence!"

The doors to the tarmac swung open to the roar of the twin prop.

"The Sheikh is a tool!" he shouted.

I walked away, but he followed me across the runway, and although I could not hear him I knew he was repeating the rumors—that the Sheikh was a stooge for the Saudi royal family; that he was a whiskey-drinking marauder whose thugs trolled the Sheraton for women; and, most damaging of all, that the Sheikh financed Al Qaeda. Al Amoudi's lawyers had sued Elias Kifle, editor of the *Ethiopian Review*, for libel over that story and won.

I no longer cared about the gossip, and when the man insisted I sit next to him on the plane it was with reluctance that I complied. For the next hour he filled my ears with scandal. A few months later, he asked that I remove his name from this article.

**I**n Ethiopia, all things bright and shady start and end at the Sheraton. My last night in Addis, Aman and I made it back to the hotel and headed over to the pool, where the bar was packed. I bought a beer and watched the whiskey-drinking marauders. Aman tapped my shoulder and smiled. "Look," he said. I followed his gaze to a compact man in a dark suit who sat on a bar stool surrounded by three or four much larger men.

"It's Fikru."

Aman insisted I say hello, so he brought me over and I shook hands with the Saudi Star CEO. I thanked him for extending the hospitality of his crew in Gambella. I mentioned the professionalism of Yitagas and Deribew. Then I explained how I had been wanting to interview him since I had landed in Ethiopia, but had just thrown away my list of questions.

Fikru nodded and said nothing. I wasn't sure he had even heard me. His eyes strayed over my shoulder to the people by the pool. I turned and saw Ivy League Africanists, European aid workers, politicians, prostitutes, gunrunners, helicopter pilots, diplomats from South Sudan, and careerists from the WFP, UNHCR, and USAID—all of them well-fed, drunk, and dancing close to the water's edge. ■



# 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY LIMITED

*The lost glory of America's railroads*

BY KEVIN BAKER



**W**e start in darkness. After fighting our way through the dingy, low-ceilinged, crowded waiting room that serves as New York City's current Pennsylvania Station, we pull out through a graffitied tunnel that follows one of the oldest roadbeds in America. Freight trains once clattered along open tracks here, spewing smoke within a few dozen yards of the mansions along Riverside Drive and attracting one of the most

dangerous hobo encampments in the country, before it was finally all buried beneath a graceful park in the 1930s. Today, we emerge into sunlight for the first time in Harlem, following a route up the glorious Hudson River, past Bear and Storm King Mountains, and the old ruined Bannerman castle on Pollepel Island.

A dining car is attached at Albany—a delay that takes an hour. For that matter, we are not actually

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Above and subsequent pages, unless otherwise noted: Photographs by McNair Evans from In Search of Great Men, an ongoing project documenting long-distance travel on Amtrak. This page: Empty café car near Tomah, Wisconsin, on the California Zephyr from Emeryville to Chicago



in Albany but in Rensselaer, across the river, where in 2002 Amtrak completed the largest train station built in this country since 1939—a structure that has all the individuality of a shopping-mall Barnes & Noble. But we gladly seize the opportunity to stand on the open platform and stare across the Hudson at the capital. It's a splendid early-fall evening, and we're at the start of an adventure. We smoke and stretch our legs, and I chat with Derrick, our sleeping-car porter, who is in charge of providing for all the passengers in his five compartments and ten "roomettes." He tells me he emigrated from Uganda and has been working for the railroad for the past two and a half years.

Amtrak's long-distance dining and sleeper-car crews tend to be efficient and almost indefatigably



friendly, despite the long trips and the relentless demands of their jobs. A high percentage of them are people of color, an old railroad tradition. (George Pullman, searching for an uncomplaining workforce to service his new cars, began the practice of recruiting former slaves to work as porters soon after the Civil War. Yet they did not prove as pliable as Pullman would have liked; though it took them decades, they organized their own union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, under slogans such as "Fight or Be Slaves," and hired a socialist firebrand named A. Philip Randolph to run it.)

By the time we step back on the train in Rensselaer, we can hear the dining-car crew setting up for the evening meal. Once, railroad-dining-car chefs produced some of the best food in America at almost any time of the day or night, serving up regional specialties on real china, with glass, silver, and fine linen napkins. Today the food is prepackaged and warmed up, airline-style meals served mostly on hardened paper or plastic dishes. All across America the menus are the same: a choice of reasonably edible steak, hamburger, chicken, salmon, or pasta, accompanied by a couple of dinner rolls and an anemic salad. But the real attraction is the strangers you're seated with.

Map by Dolly Holmes

My first night I sit with a merry retired couple, Mark and Linda, a former middle-school teacher and an accountant from Hyde Park, New York, who love train travel. They constitute, I will discover, one of the three leading categories of long-distance train passengers: train enthusiasts, derisively called foamers by Amtrak crew members. (The others are tourists from Britain and those who, for one reason or another—physical or psychological—cannot tolerate the many inconveniences of air travel.)

Mark and Linda are foamers. They buy everything on their Amtrak credit cards in order to run up rewards points, as do many of the enthusiasts I encountered. Mark is also a model-train buff. They are New Deal liberals, and though outright politics is almost religiously avoided around the close quarters of an Amtrak dining table, most sleeping-car passengers will let on quietly, almost conspiratorially, that they believe in things like public investment, and not just for trains.

Mark can reel off the names of the towns we are passing in upstate New York even in the darkness—"Amsterdam, Utica, Syracuse!"—from his time spent camping in the area with his two sons. But he and Linda are disheartened by the economic disaster that has hit much of upstate, and wonder what is to become of the region where they've spent so much of their lives.

**W**e are following the route of the New York Central's most famous train, the 20th Century Limited, which once rivaled Europe's Orient Express in extravagance. At five o'clock every evening, porters used to roll a red carpet to the train across the platform of Grand Central Terminal's Track 34. The women passengers were given bouquets of flowers and bottles of perfume; the men, carnations for their buttonholes. The train had its own barber-shop, post office, manicurists and masseuses, secretaries, typists, and stenographers. In 1938, its beautiful blue-gray-and-aluminum-edged cars and its "streamline" locomotives—finned, bullet-nosed, Art Deco masterpieces of fluted steel—took just sixteen hours to reach Chicago, faster than any train running today.

The 20th Century Limited became a cultural icon. It was a luxury train, but middle-class people rode it, too. In the heyday of American train travel after World War II, they also rode the Broadway Limited, the Super Chief from Chicago to Los Angeles, and the California Zephyr, which were nearly as celebrated and beloved.

Some twenty years later, it was all over. Virtually every privately owned passenger-rail line had died by 1970, done in by cheap gas and jet engines. The pathetic mishmash of decaying stock that remained was lumped together into a Nixonian experiment: a publicly funded, for-profit corporation



dubbed Amtrak. It was widely believed that this arrangement was set up to fail, because saving trains seemed pointless. Americans wishing to travel long distances could drive their cars on the interstates or take a plane or intercity bus. Railroads seemed as archaic a mode of transportation as the wagon train.

But unexpectedly, ridership began to creep up—from fewer than 16 million in 1972 to more than 21 million in 1980. After 9/11, when air travel turned into unmitigated misery, it shot up to 30 million. Along the Northeast Corridor, between Washington and Boston, which generates 80 percent of Amtrak's revenue, the train's share of all combined plane and rail traffic has more than doubled, from 37 percent in 2000 to 75 percent today.

Barack Obama, during his 2011 State of the Union address, promised to lead America into a green industrial economy, and he committed his administration to a vision of giving "eighty percent of Americans access to high-speed rail within twenty-five years." In 2009, invoking our history—Lincoln starting the transcontinental railroad while the Civil War raged, Eisenhower building the interstates during the Cold War—and challenging our national honor ("There's no reason why we

mate and allow us to re-create sustainable communities. Now we would have new trains, fast trains, magnetic-levitation trains that never touch the ground. Not just between nearby cities but



can't do this: this is America"), the president made the argument that "building a new system of high-speed rail in America will be faster, cheaper, and easier than building more freeways or adding to an already overburdened aviation system—and everybody stands to benefit."

Trains would help end our dependence on oil as well as our rapid transformation of the earth's cli-

mate across entire states and regions, eliminating the need for new airports and highways, replacing countless barrels of oil with electricity, or maybe using no traditional power source at all!

Yet by the fall of 2013, plans for any new high-speed national rail system—plans even for seriously upgrading our existing rail system—had been delayed for the foreseeable future. How had this come to pass? We used to value trains, used to imbue them and their stations with all the grace, beauty, and efficiency we were capable of as a people and a democracy.

To cross the continent by train in the fall of 2013, just as the organized right was about to shut down the national government, was an opportunity to trace our country's

entire fantastical boom-and-bust progress. It was also a chance to glimpse an American treasure that if squandered might never be regained.

**T**he Lake Shore Limited is not, strictly speaking, a limited train, since it makes eighteen stops on its way to Chicago. The name is due mostly to

Top: As rains slow construction work in California, a man travels from Sacramento to Iowa on the California Zephyr to spend the winter building grain bins.  
Bottom: Metra tracks to downtown Chicago near the transfer point between the California Zephyr and the Lake Shore Limited



Amtrak's effort to evoke the great trains of the past, but it does follow the old water-level route around the Great Lakes, advertised as superior for sleeping because it does not climb and descend the mountain grades of the Alleghenies.

Nonetheless, I'm awakened repeatedly by the banging of cars and the grinding and wrenching of metal wheels along the track. The Lake Shore Limited pulls into stations or onto sidings to let other trains pass, then sprints to 'make up the time—a constant slowing and accelerating that is characteristic of long-distance Amtrak trains and that makes sustained sleep difficult.

At half past three in the morning we stop again, and I peer outside into the darkness. There is only a flat little box of a train station visible, and a small parking lot surrounded by a chain-link fence. A few figures hurry furtively to their cars. I watch as they drive out past a single, towering wind turbine, a tangle of utility wires, and a looming football arena with a sign proclaiming it FirstEnergy Stadium. Only by looking at the Lake Shore's timetable can I tell that we are in Cleveland.

"FirstEnergy" is appropriate enough. Cleveland was the hub of America's first real energy boom, in the original oil fields of western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. This is where John D. Rockefeller made his fortune, not so much because of any expertise he had in finding or refining oil but because of a deal he cut with the railroads whereby they agreed to charge all his competitors as much as double the rate while providing Rockefeller with a secret discount and kickbacks on his competitors' shipments.

The landscape before me today, a hundred years

later, tells a different story of corporate hegemony. The old Cleveland station, where intercity trains stopped until 1977, was an outstanding example of Beaux Arts design constructed in the late 1920s by local brothers named Van Sweringen in imitation of New York's Grand Central.

The station is still gorgeous, but trains don't run there anymore, save for a few local commuter lines. Amtrak couldn't afford the rent, so instead it lets anyone who wants to go to Cleveland off where

we are, at Lakefront Station. Lakefront is what foamers call an Amshack—a building that looks as if it might be a storage facility for the files of an accounting firm that went out of business sometime during the Ford Administration.

It used to be that private corporations could be relied on to build exquisite public spaces at their own expense, not just slap their names on a finished product. American train stations were once the most magnificent in the world. Even in the smallest towns, they tended to be little jewels of craftsmanship. In bigger cities, they were the first monumental modern buildings erected without reference to God or king, built by the people to move the people.

Most of the leading American architects from the 1890s through the next forty years tried their hand at a train station, or more than one—Daniel Burnham, Cass Gilbert, Charles Follen McKim, Henry Hobson Richardson, Stanford White. What they produced were predominantly Beaux Arts beauties but also pretty much the entire array of architecture practiced in this country up through the 1930s, including some astonishing amalgams of styles.

Many of the great stations have been ingeniously repurposed and restored as commuter-train stops, shopping malls, museums, restaurants, even movie theaters, thanks to the foamers and the more enlightened city governments stuck with them once the old railroads died. Yet the removal of function from form is an essential societal disconnect. As Ed Breslin and Hugh Van Dusen write in the lavishly illustrated *America's Great Railroad Stations*:

Each station functioned as did the main gate on a medieval town: it was the welcoming portal to that community, and it was meant to impress, comfort, and reassure the visitor. Each station was a focal point of collective pride, a civic monument large or small. All embodied America's love of, and genius for, commercial excellence. Whether built on the scale of a small chapel, a substantial church, or a monumental cathedral, all of these stations personified and reflected America's secular spirituality fueled by the belief that life could endlessly be enhanced by aesthetic beauty, industrial might, technological know-how, and creature comforts while traveling in style with alacrity from one point on the compass to another.

In Chicago's Union Station, the Metropolitan Lounge is in chaos. The station is one of Daniel Burnham's surviving gems, but for some reason its grand hall lies empty and still, while long-distance passengers and their luggage are jammed into a drab, undersize basement room. Only Amtrak could turn a luxury lounge into a refugee center. Most of the passengers struggle and sway hauling their bag-





gage down to the train, then up the twisting stairs inside the double-decker cars.

Gazing out the window in the dappled afternoon light a few minutes before we leave, I see luggage handlers piling bags atop an ancient, wood-bedded open wagon. I might have witnessed much this same scene, even this same equipment, at Lincoln's first convention, back in 1860, the first in a long line of political conventions of all denominations—Democratic, Republican, Bull Moose, Socialist, Communist—held in Chicago, because it was the nation's premier train hub.

Over on the next platform are a couple of antique railcars, a charter doubtless ordered up by some of the wealthier foamers. There are entire associations of private railroad-car owners and renters who still hook up their cars to Amtrak trains. This is a subtler threat to the future of Amtrak and passenger-rail service than are the budget-cutters in Congress—the danger that train travel will be seen as merely a hobbyist's preoccupation. But it's impossible to deny the beauty of the antique observation car I can see from my window: it's another perfect artifact from the height of train design, full of padded leather armchairs and matching Art Deco side tables.

In the 1930s, America was mad for design, especially when it came to machines. Devastated by the Depression, facing their first serious competition from airlines and automobiles, the major railroads completely overhauled their rolling stock. Many trains were converted from steam to cheaper diesel-electric power. All were put in wind tunnels, tested to see what could make them go faster, use less fuel, take turns more quickly and more safely. The most prominent industrial designers in the country went to work on them. They streamlined trains, lowered their center of gravity, cut their weight, and increased their speeds. The designs alone made the trains *seem* fast. Amtrak's observation cars today are built with no equivalent sense of artistry—or any artistry at all—but they *are* comfortable, maybe the most agreeable means of travel aside from ocean-liner staterooms. One sits up high in the double decker, at a table or a long row of swivel chairs that run down each side. There are tables and drinks stands at each seat, and the windows provide an almost 360-degree vista as you move through the American countryside. There are no observation cars east of Chicago because of low-hanging wires, but in any case the double deckers are best served by the West, where you are viscerally reminded of just how vast our country is, how abundant and majestic—where the words of all the old patriotic songs come true.

Traveling through Wisconsin, we spend the rest of that day passing fields of perfect rows of cab-



bage, pumpkins, beans. By the following morning, we are in North Dakota, and the landscape becomes sparser and more monotonous: miles of shallow marshes and fields of high green grass, occasional rows of old trees planted eighty years ago by the youths of the Civilian Conservation Corps to serve as wind breaks. But all of it is punctuated by breathtaking beauty. A pair of eagles swoop and glide low over a golden field of wheat near Williston. A white horse ambles and grazes its way alone through some marshland. A flock of small black birds rise and wheel suddenly through yellowed grassland. Black cattle stand out against a pasture, muzzles up, watching us pass.

The company in the dining and observation cars is so amiable that I was dissuaded from asking people's last names when they weren't offered. The passengers talk quietly and freely with one another. A pair of children march in with their mother, pretending to be a parade. A young man with an enormous Afro sits alone reading. A group of blustery young white men come in, regaling one another with tales of getting arrested.

At my table at lunch there is Kate, an English assistant headmistress, just retired. She tells me about how she taught in New Guinea with her husband for seven years, then raised four children by herself after being widowed very young. Now she is finally on holiday, having sent the last child off to university. Kate is fascinated by America's sheer size, and also by its countless religions: "I think they're related. When people want to, they simply go off and start another one."

The train makes her case for her. In a single afternoon moving through North Dakota, I have conversations with an Amish person and a Mennonite. There are plenty of each traveling on the Empire Builder. Alice, the Mennonite, is a pretty,

Opposite page: Passengers in Wisconsin board an Empire Builder bound from Seattle to Chicago.

This page: Tank cars in central Florida seen through the window of a Silver Meteor from Miami to New York



birdlike woman who owns her own catering business in Canada. Apart from her old-fashioned dress and her hair bun she seems thoroughly modern, showing me a picture on her phone of her congregation's little blue church.

Felty Miller is a young construction worker, part of a large party of Amish bound from western Tennessee to a wedding in Washington State. He does not object to my interrupting his reading of a big illustrated Bible in the observation car. Like the other Amish men, he is dressed in a neat dark-blue shirt, pressed black pants, and a vest, and has light-brown, curling chin whiskers. He dandles Elias, his two-year-old, towheaded son, over his knee as he patiently explains to me that, yes, he is used to the speed of the train, having ridden in trucks that the outside contractors the Amish work with drive. He speaks of how bad the economy still is—and offers the opinion that more money needs to be put into the national rail system.

**F**or all the pastoral beauty of the Plains states, passenger trains are interlopers here amid the hidden industrial life of the country—hidden, at least, to those of us who live in more crowded places. In Wolf Point, Montana, we watch as a truck heaped with rolls of hay drives by on the cracked two-lane highway. We pass huge grain silos, some abandoned and open to the elements, most still in use, a few houses and barns huddled nearby. Intermittent freight trains sweep past us.

Some of the freight trains are made up of boxcars, some of the oil-tank cars now overwhelming our neglected infrastructure in a series of spectacular derailments and fires around the country. On one freight train alone, I counted 104 tank cars, fat and rounded as big black pigs. They slow to pass us, but still we rock in their wake like a small boat on a heavy sea.

Freight is the main economic reason why trains—or any other form of mass transportation—exist. “A passenger train is like a male teat—neither useful nor ornamental,” grouched James J. Hill, whose nickname, “the Empire Builder,” adorns our train, when he was running the Great Northern Railway through these parts more than a century ago.

U.S. passenger trains may be, “quite simply, a global laughingstock,” as *Time* magazine put it a few years ago, but American freight trains “are universally recognised in the industry as the best in the world,” according to *The Economist*, and they still have an estimated 43 percent share of the freight market in the United States—the highest proportion in any industrialized country, and nearly ten times the total tonnage moved by freight trains in the entire European Union.

Freight companies also own most of the rails in the United States, which is one reason why U.S. passenger trains lag so far behind high-speed

systems in Europe and China, where trains rocket along at more than 150 miles per hour, much less Japan's new Shinkansen bullet, which runs at 200 miles per hour. All these trains travel on dedicated tracks or in sunken, walled corridors, and so can be built light and fast.

Amtrak trains, by contrast, must weigh about twice as much as the average European passenger train in order to have any chance of surviving a potential collision on the rails they share with the freights. Even the Acela—the result of Amtrak's big 1990s effort to build a train that might average 150 miles per hour on the Northeast Corridor—is so bulky and plodding that the French and Canadian engineers working on it nicknamed it *le cochon*, “the pig.” The Acela never actually achieves that speed, save on a couple of very short stretches of track in New England. Overall, it manages just about sixty-nine miles per hour—about the same as Amtrak's regional trains, or the cars on the highways just outside its windows.

At dinner the first night out from Chicago is Jason, returning to his job laying pipe in North Dakota's Bakken oil fields. A trim, big-shouldered man who looks younger than his forty years, Jason just celebrated his twentieth wedding anniversary in Michigan with his wife. The Bakken job pays well and he likes it, having worked in the past as a firefighter and a die maker for “a big company” at which he saved “a documented two hundred fifty thousand dollars over nine years, but never got a penny raise for it.” Now he is part of a twenty-eight-man crew in the fields, along with his brother-in-law and his nineteen-year-old son, whom he says he is glad to have the chance to keep an eye on.

In North Dakota, Jason lives with three other men in an RV, where he cooks and also raises and cans vegetables from his garden plot. Local food prices are at boomtown levels. For everything else he needs, he goes to the Walmart in Williston, though he reports that demand is so high now that the shelves are often empty, which forces him to travel some 125 miles to the better-stocked Walmart in Waterford Township.

**A**t Minot, a small prairie city in North Dakota, the porters bring on stacks of the *Minot Daily News*, which boasts the most risibly far-right editorial page I have ever seen. There are two syndicated columns, one by Rich Lowry arguing that we don't need any more gun-control laws, the other by Brent Bozell arguing that we don't need any more gun-control laws, and a column by George Will mocking President Obama for not comparing the civil war in Syria to the Nazi blitz on London.

Will wrote an equally vitriolic diatribe in 2011 for *Newsweek* entitled “Why Liberals Love Trains.” In it, he scorned “the president's loopy goal” of giv-



ing 80 percent of all Americans access to high-speed trains, citing the contentions of the Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole that "high-speed rail connects big-city downtowns where only 7 percent of Americans work and 1 percent live," and that the "average intercity auto trip today uses less energy per passenger mile than the average Amtrak train," while "high speed will not displace enough cars to measurably reduce [traffic] congestion" and will in any case be too danged expensive.

All the practical reasons for promoting train travel, which Will sneers at for their "flimsiness," are in fact of vital importance in a world where every day brings a new report from actual scientists that climate change is proceeding at a pace faster than anticipated. An average freight train expends slightly more than one twelfth the BTUs per short-ton mile as a heavy truck, while, as Tom Zoellner puts it in his book *Train*, "One trainload of passengers equals about a hundred city blocks of cars." Amtrak expends an estimated 1,600 BTUs of energy per passenger mile, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation, compared with about 3,300 for buses, 2,500 for airplanes, and a whopping 3,900 for the cars that now besiege most American cities and suburbs in hours-long traffic jams. This is not even to mention plane travel—conspicuous in its omission from Will's rant—in the course of which one is now X-rayed, wanded, patted, groped, deprived of shoes and belt like any other prisoner, then sausaged into an ever more crowded tube, charged for every minor amenity, and dropped at least a good hour and fifty dollars from one of those allegedly desolate downtowns we don't need to reach anymore.

Silliest of all Will's charges, though, is his insistence that trains are "Archimedian levers" designed to make Americans "more amenable to collectivism." Beyond the immense freedom that Amtrak trains in fact provide the individual to read, work, eat, drink, sleep, or stare out at the beauty of America, what stands out about any Amtrak train, at least in the day coaches, is the incredible diversity of the passengers. The usual categories only begin to scratch the surface. To walk through the Empire Builder at night was to pass scenes of incredible sweetness: couples snuggled together under blankets, mothers with babies in their arms, whole families of every possible color and age and creed strewn out over the seats and snoring uninhibitedly.

In the observation car, the Amish wedding-goers sat up together at two tables in the dimmed lighting—lighting perhaps no brighter than the oil lanterns provided when trains first rolled across these plains: the men dressed and beard-

ed like Feltz Miller, the women in long black or blue dresses and white bonnets, all of them talking and laughing quietly in their unique German dialect, members of one of the very first religious groups to find refuge in America from persecution. It struck me that Whitman would be right at home on the train, even if Will would not.

**W**hat is the appeal of train travel? Ask almost any foamer, and he or she will invariably answer,

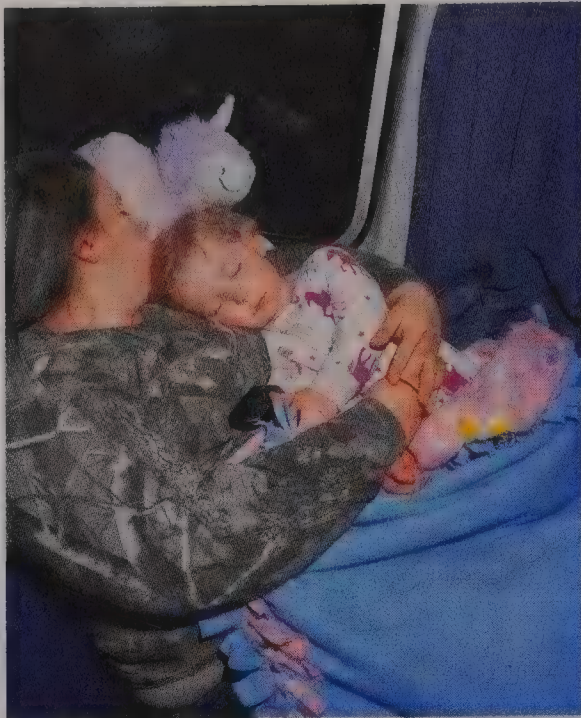


"The romance of it!" But just what this means, they cannot really say. It's tempting to think that we are simply equating romance with pleasure, with the superior comfort of a train, especially seated up high in the observation cars. But having seen a rural train emerge silently through a gap in the New England woods, having seen the long slide of a 1 train's headlights down the rails of a Manhattan subway station, I suspect that the appeal of trains is something more primitive than this. Trains are huge things that come upon us like predators. Almost from the beginning of the machine age, Americans yearned and sought ways for the train to connect their little towns—to connect *them*—to the greater world.

Romance or not, it is this very practical desire that has probably kept Amtrak alive. The Republican right politicized train travel long before George Will and the Tea Party—almost from the moment it failed to expire on cue, in fact. David Stockman, Ronald Reagan's budget director, dedicated himself to terminating Amtrak, denouncing trains as "empty rattletaps" and "mobile money-burning machines."

Morning commuters at a station in Wilmington, Delaware, along the Silver Star line from New York to Miami





Over the years, Republicans have pushed the question of Amtrak's continued existence into that same strange sphere of debate in which they have isolated nearly all public institutions, save the military: not whether it serves a valuable social and economic function, but whether it makes a profit.

Highway advocates point to tolls and gas taxes as evidence that pavement is self-sustaining; rail's supporters object that train riders are forced to pay such subsidies, too. Federal highway subsidies came to some \$41.5 billion in 2013; federal aviation subsidies, to \$16 billion. Amtrak, by contrast, received only \$1.6 billion. *All* Amtrak's subsidies for the past forty years—almost its entire existence—do not equal what the U.S. Treasury transfers from its General Fund to the Highway Trust Fund in a single year. To put it another way, each American citizen pays \$4.07 a year to keep Amtrak running.

Whether even this amount will be forthcoming in the future is open to conjecture. Rail service has many friends but a limited constituency. There are just over 20,000 Amtrak workers; by comparison, New York City's MTA system employs more than 70,000 people. Only 2 percent of Americans say they've ever set foot on an Amtrak train, and only 3 percent of American workers commute by local train. A cursory swing through the nation's capital confirms what an uneven struggle the politics of trains really is. Amtrak's leading defenders are only the rail service itself, ensconced in Washington's Union Station, and the National Association of Railroad Passengers, a plucky nonprofit advocacy group with a membership of only 23,000, tucked away in a few rooms of a town house in an old neighborhood not far from the station.

And yet, so far at least, this uneven struggle has not worked out the way anyone expected, thanks not just to the fervor of trains' defenders but also to the votes of Republican congressmen and senators, often from the region of the country I am passing through now. Amtrak is the only public-

transportation link to the outside world for more than 300 of its stops—many of them in small communities scattered over the Empire Builder's route through North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, and eastern Washington State. For years, Stockman's desire to defund Amtrak was thwarted by Mark Andrews, an otherwise undistinguished one-term North Dakota senator who came to Washington on the coattails of Reagan's sweep in 1980 but was determined to keep train service available to his constituents.

In recent years, Republicans have mostly confined themselves to their trivial if mean-spirited proposals for paring down train costs—what is perhaps intended to be a death by a thousand cuts. While Amtrak workers actually make less than private-sector employees in similar positions, the G.O.P. objects to their health-care and benefit plans. Other Republican congressmen have pushed the bold idea of replacing the café cars with vending machines, and there have been the frequent suggestions that our national passenger-rail service should simply be privatized and returned to the states.

How this might in fact work was demonstrated by Amtrak's recent request that Colorado, Kansas, and New Mexico each chip in \$40 million annually over the next twenty years—\$2 million per state per year—to help keep the Southwest Chief line running along its current route. Even this small request for additional state funding has set off extended bickering and created a deadlock between the states involved—along with outcries from many of the small communities the Southwest Chief now serves.

**A**n object lesson in what the train means to the small towns of the West is Shelby, Montana, hard by the Canadian border. The Empire Builder reaches it around ten thirty at night, running five hours behind schedule thanks to the freight traffic.

This page, from left: An Amtrak employee on the Silver Star. A mother and daughter travel from Cary, North Carolina, to Jacksonville, Florida, on the Silver Star. A passenger eats breakfast on the Crescent from New York to New Orleans as it passes through Charlotte, North Carolina. Opposite page, from left: A commuter on the Silver Star to Miami. A former Marine returning to Onalaska, Texas, on the Sunset Limited from Los Angeles to New Orleans after a reunion with fellow Vietnam veterans. A woman on the Silver Star travels to Miami with her twin sister to celebrate their birthday.





Shelby was where the craziest of all Western booms took place, back in 1923—boom and bust, all in one day. After an oil strike that drove the town's population from 500 into the thousands overnight, Shelby's leading citizens decided they might parlay their good fortune into becoming a permanent resort destination, provided they could host a fight for the heavyweight boxing championship of the world on the Fourth of July.

It was a typical Western dream: audacious, patriotic, idiotic, and quickly exploited by a grifter from back east. But Shelby's town fathers were on to something. The-

oretically, at least, it didn't matter now how small their town was, or how far it was from any other population center. The railroad could magically alter time and space.

"There was good railroad service into Shelby along the tracks of [the] Great Northern [Railway]," Roger Kahn wrote in his 1999 biography of boxing legend Jack Dempsey, *A Flame of Pure Fire*. "Fight fans could come in on coaches and Pullman cars from Spokane and Seattle and San Francisco, or from Grand Forks and Minneapolis and St. Paul, even Chicago and New York."

The trouble was that the railroads, never quite believing the town could pull off the big fight, declined to run any special trains. Just under 8,000 paying customers showed up, in an age when heavyweight-title bouts routinely attracted 100,000 spectators. By the time it was all over, every bank in the area had gone bust, and Dempsey's nefarious manager, Doc Kearns, was stuffing

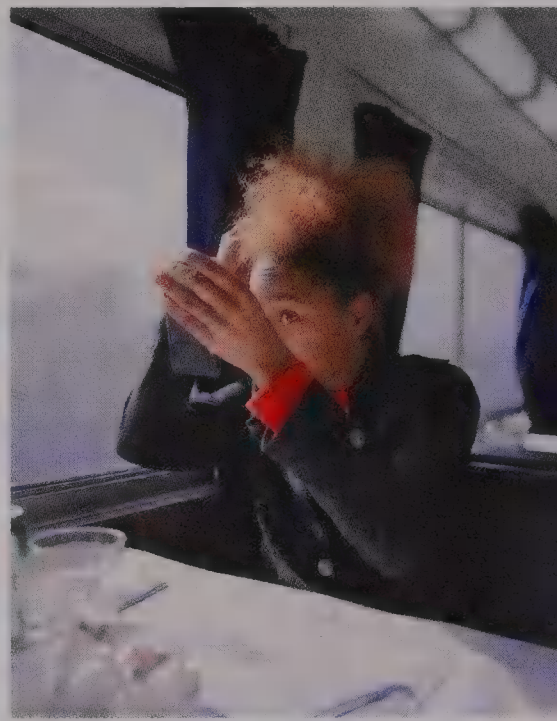
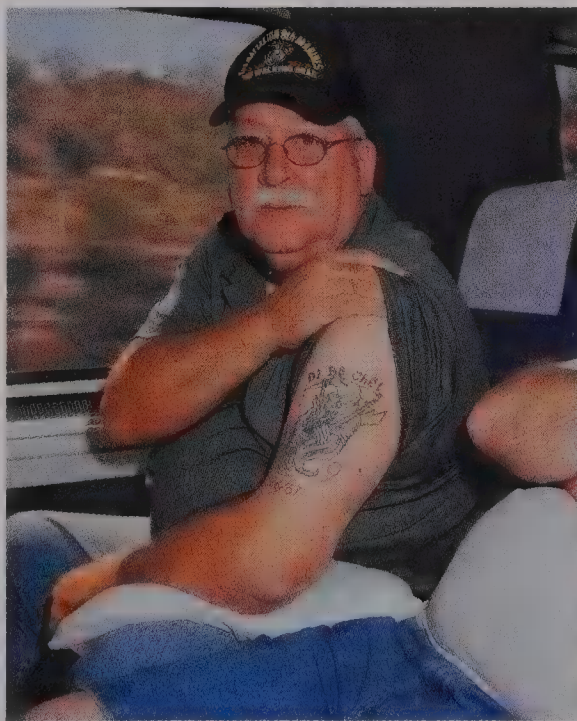
the last of the town's money into a suitcase and running for his train, while the locals discussed whether to string him up from some nearby cottonwoods. "Lonely-looking trees they were, at that," Kearns would remember.

Seen from the train, Shelby today is little more than a gas-station sign looming out of the darkness. But it's a working town of more than 3,000 citizens, out here in the illimitable Western prairie, still served twice a day by the Empire Builder.

**T**he next morning breaks bright but turns appropriately overcast as we snake our way down along the bank of the Columbia River and into the rain shadow of the Rockies. This is ominous-looking, barren country, studded with desolate gray and brown hills. It is another industrial landscape, with enormous machinery scattered here and there, but the only sign of human activity to be seen is another train, making its way along the south bank of the wide, slow river. The clouds hang lower, but the hills grow steadily more steep and wooded, each passing scene more dramatic as we approach the Pacific.

I catch the Coast Starlight out of Portland's pretty redbrick-and-stucco Union Station, with its high clock tower and its mural of Lewis and Clark inside. The Coast Starlight is the closest thing Amtrak has to a 20th Century Limited—to an elite carrier—even if the differences from its other long-distance lines are trivial. A voice purrs quietly over the public-address system, urging us not to bother our fellow passengers too much by using cell phones. A complimentary split of champagne and a wine-and-cheese tasting are on offer in the "parlor car."

There are "wine tastings" on many long-distance Amtrak trains, but this usually means a few plastic





cups of table red. On the Starlight, local vintages and artisanal cheeses are served in actual glasses and on real plates, and they are presented with copious guides to what we are about to devour and which bottles will be available for purchase. It's all wittily moderated by a train steward with a steady comic patter, much to the delight of a small English

tween multiple urban centers. It was, in short, a plan to replicate what already works—Amtrak's Northeast Corridor—all over the country, and make it better, maybe building a permanent ridership for trains in the bargain.

The trouble came, as it so often does with Mr. Obama, on the follow-through. The \$9.3 billion he requested for railroads in the first stimulus proposal was a ridiculously small amount for the project at hand—one that signaled through its size alone what a low priority rails really are for this administration. Of that \$9.3 billion, a mere \$1.3 billion went to upgrading existing Amtrak operations, partially through the purchase of seventy new, badly needed electric locomotives. The remaining \$8 billion was allocated to the planned high-speed-rail corridors. This was barely enough to build a hundred miles of track. The original thirteen proposed corridors were narrowed down to four, in California, Florida, Ohio, and Wisconsin. But none of these plans was put into place before the 2010 elections swept Democratic governors and legislatures out of power in Florida, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Their Tea Party replacements gleefully renounced federal money for the train corridors as “high-speed boondoggles.”

The one exception was California, where Jerry Brown was back as governor and where voters had already approved a referendum authorizing the state to spend \$9.95 billion to build new trains that could travel from Los Angeles to both San Francisco and Sacramento, and do it in no more than two hours and forty minutes. The federal government has now pledged some \$6.4 billion of the original \$8 billion designated for fast trains to the California project, with the hope that it will be completed sometime in or around ... 2033.

It has been determined that at least 40 percent of the new rail will be elevated, with an estimated 22,000 enormous concrete pillars carrying the train through earthquake-prone California and replicating the very sort of hated elevated urban highway that so many cities have just spent decades tearing down at enormous cost and trouble. Even in the depressed farming communities of California's Central Valley, where the first leg of this monstrosity is supposed to take shape, opposition has been intense. Governor Brown, however, has remained committed, ridiculing the plan's opponents as “fraidy cats” and “fearful men—declinists who want to put their head in a hole and hope reality changes.” But the changing reality proved to be the system's projected costs, which started at an estimated \$42 billion, then rose to \$68 billion—or \$190 million a mile, enough to run two public high schools for a year. By the end of 2013, Brown was in China, still

tour group and an Australian family of three, who are reduced to almost nonstop laughing and snorting by the wine and japes.

The parlor car was built for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway in 1955, during the last gasp of opulent train design. It has cut-glass booth dividers with the name and logo of the legendary, long-vanished railroad it was intended for, and well-crafted corner cabinet bookcases that hold a few musty books, magazines, and board games. Downstairs is a tiny movie theater that shows a children's film during our imbibing and, later on, the most recent *Great Gatsby* for the adults.

The Coast Starlight does not really travel along the coast until San Francisco, but we do pass through lush river valleys and alongside well-heeled small towns, suburbs, and country homes.

California was supposed to be where President Obama's vision for the future of rail was to become reality. In theory, his plan was a good one. It called for immediate upgrades on “existing infrastructure to increase speeds on some [Amtrak] routes from seventy ... to over a hundred miles per hour.” This would be followed by longer projects to create true high-speed-rail systems on thirteen major corridors throughout the United States, each of them one hundred to 600 miles in length and running be-

View from the window of a Crescent traveling through North Carolina after a night of snowstorms and delays



seeking additional funding for this El to nowhere—now estimated to cost more than \$91 billion.

If, as Zoellner writes, the American rail system today is an example of “technological regress,” the Obama fast-train project is political regress. A large and immediate commitment of money to upgrade successful existing Amtrak trains—increasing their speeds and frequency, making their service and safety better, reducing their price—might have bolstered a growing constituency for mass transit while providing jobs, improving the environment, and supporting smarter growth. Instead, the Obama Administration’s failure to move with alacrity, clarity of purpose, or even basic competence has probably doomed not only its own efforts but a critical national project.

Whether or not California’s fast rail will ever reach San Francisco, no Amtrak train goes there today. Now a trip back across the continent starts with a predawn bus pick-up along Fisherman’s Wharf, for delivery to another Amshack, in Emeryville, a generic northern California suburb where there is not a hint of, say, a hotel. An electronic board lists all of two local trains; a sign next to it announces that the two long-distance lines here, the Coast Starlight and the California Zephyr, will not be listed on the board.

The Zephyr runs across both the Sierra Nevada and the Rockies, back through the heart of empire. By the afternoon, we are climbing steadily through the foothills of the Sierras, passing just north of where gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill in 1848, setting off the daddy of all Western booms. Soon we are between 1,500 and 1,800 feet above the American River, then the Bear River, revealed to us in one stunning vista after another through the mountain woods, territory so absolutely beautiful that all we can do in the observation car is snap away with our cameras or phones, or sit helplessly mumbling superlatives.

At 7,000 feet, we reach the pass where the Donner party came to grief, resorting to murder and cannibalism when their wagon train was caught by the first mountain snows, though their fate was exceptional. Planning their trips with incredible care, almost every other wagon train made it through. Even so, only about 200,000 pioneers had followed the Overland Trail to California by the time the Civil War began. The journey took five to six months, and the only alternatives—traveling around Cape Horn or across the fever-ridden Isthmus of Panama—were full of worse perils.

A young railroad man from Connecticut had another idea. Theodore Judah talked so obsessively about the idea of building a railroad across the continent that people began to call him Crazy Judah. By 1860, after four years of searching, he

was sure he had found his route—the one we are taking now through the Donner Pass.

The transcontinental railroad proved a remarkably easy sell, even with the country about to lurch into civil war. In part, the Union wanted it as a way of keeping California and Oregon attached to the country. Yet well before the war, America was sold on the idea of a continental road—its leaders and opinion makers remarkably prescient about the prospects of global trade. For John C. Frémont, the transcontinental meant that “America will be between Asia and Europe—the golden vein which runs through the history of the world will follow the track to San Francisco, and the Asiatic trade will finally fall into its last and permanent road.” Asa Whitney, a New York dry-goods merchant, wrote in 1845:

You will see that it will change the whole world... It will bring the world together as one nation, allow us to traverse the globe in thirty days, civilize and Christianize mankind, and place us in the center of the world, compelling Europe on one side and Asia and Africa on the other to pass through us.

In reality, the transcontinental railroad was not merely ill conceived but actively destructive, according to historian Richard White, who makes the case in his 2011 book, *Railroaded*, that all the rail lines eventually built through North America



were run by “inefficient, costly, dysfunctional corporations” and should not have even been attempted. In their immaturity, White maintains, they were “failures as businesses” that started repeated financial panics; “helped both to corrupt and to transform the political system by creating the modern corporate lobby”; “flooded markets

The northern banks of Lake Pontchartrain seen through the window of a City of New Orleans bound for Chicago



with wheat, silver, cattle, and coal for which there was little or no need"; wrecked communities, including many Native American nations, as well as individuals; crushed their own workers; and "yielded great environmental and social harm."

White's criticisms are inescapable, but they seem more an indictment of the nation and the age than of the railroad itself. Certainly the Native American peoples east of the Mississippi fared no better than those to the west, even if it took white



settlers—without trains—centuries longer to overrun them. Booms and busts had roiled America from the time of the Jamestown Colony, as had financial chicanery since at least the moment the first government bonds set Wall Street in motion. The railroad was not so much a cause as a symptom or a tool.

What remained, though, was that prophetic nineteenth-century vision of America at the center of the world, strategically situated between the economic powerhouses of Europe and a resurgent Asia. And, of course, the physical reality of the railroad itself.

Abraham Lincoln enthusiastically signed the Pacific Railway Act of 1862 into law with almost no opposition from Congress. His government chartered both a Union Pacific Railroad company, to build west from the Missouri River, and the Central Pacific Railroad, to build east from Sacramento. Both companies would be granted ten square miles of land for every mile of track laid—an enormous government giveaway. Government bonds would raise \$16,000 a mile for construction over flat land, \$32,000 a mile in the high plains, \$48,000 a mile for the passage through the Sierras and the Rockies.

A canyon of the upper Colorado River along the California Zephyr line

Despite this subsidy, nobody was sure the job could be done. The Donner Pass route that Judah proposed might be compared to a great ramp up the mountains from Sacramento. Climbing it today, we can still appreciate how gradual it is, perfect for a means of conveyance clamped around two metal rails. But just past Donner Lake was a thousand-foot rock wall, and all along the route were granite ridges, liable to sudden rock slides and thirty-foot snowfalls.

The work required 13,500 men to hack away at the Donner Pass with the most primitive of tools—picks and shovels, wheelbarrows, and one-horse dump carts. Progress slowed sometimes to as little as two or three inches a day. The solution was nitroglycerine and Chinese immigrants. The former had to be concocted on-site, after a shipment annihilated a San Francisco dock and killed fifteen people. But the largely Irish, immigrant workforce still wouldn't touch the stuff, and the Central Pacific resorted to the almost entirely male population of Chinese laborers who had come to California chasing the *Gum Sham*, "the Mountain of Gold," only to be ostracized, persecuted, and frequently lynched by local whites.

The Central Pacific loved them, eventually hiring some 12,000 Chinese men—who would work for lower wages than white laborers demanded and made up about 80 percent of the workforce—to bring the road through the mountains. Lowered along the rock walls in gigantic baskets, they drilled holes fifteen to eighteen inches deep, poured in the nitroglycerine, capped the hole, then set the nitro off with a slow match. They worked carefully and well, but the real benefit to the Central Pacific was that nobody much cared how many of them got blown up. Estimates vary widely as to how many died cutting their way through the Sierras, obliterated by the nitro or crushed under the rock slides it set off. It was carnage enough to

provoke even these desperate men to go on strike, though they won a raise of only five dollars a month.

**T**he California Zephyr climbs steadily along Judah's great ramp, moving all the while past what remains of the rustic mountain towns founded to help build the railroad and support its operations. At 4,700 feet, we pass Blue Canyon, once a town of more than 3,000 people, with water so pure and delicious it was considered the best in the West and was served on all South Pacific Coast trains. Today the town consists of a few scattered houses, half-hidden in the woods. We pass Gold Run, where hydraulic engines lifted millions of dollars' worth of gold out of the ground before the mines gave out and the town was abandoned, and Cisco, a supply depot 5,938 feet above sea level where more than 7,000 people once made their home—



now no more than a few houses and some rusting sheds next to Interstate 70.

After Lake Spaulding, we move into a long snowshed, built to protect passing trains in the event of an avalanche. Once there were thirty-seven miles of them, snaking their way through the mountains. Sparks from the old engines routinely set them on fire, but the railroad work crews kept rebuilding them. Supposedly, one third of all the forest in California was chopped down to provide the timber for them, and for all the bridges and the work sheds and the ties needed to build the railroad and keep it running. Near Norden, another tiny community, we pass the Summit Tunnel, the peak of the railroad in the Sierras, where the Chinese blasted their way through 1,649 feet of solid rock, making a way that passenger trains and freights used continuously until 1993.

After Norden, we descend in a series of dazzling, miles-long switchbacks, the end of our train visible on the mountain plateaus above us, and pass Truckee, a flourishing resort town that in the late nineteenth century held fourteen lumber mills and countless saloons and burned down six times in its first eleven years; then Verdi, a tiny community with a large trailer park; and Boca, a once-thriving lumber and ice-harvesting town that went bust when the sawmill shut down and the hydroelectric dams brought electricity, and now all that remains is the ruins of its vaunted brewery and a few crumbling bridges over pretty little trout streams.

This mountain scenery is so infectious that it makes us giddy in the observation car, where we continue to chatter and take pictures. At dinner I sit with two of the friendliest people from our long afternoon over the mountains, Lilly and Jackie, a mother and daughter from California. Lilly lives in Sacramento, her daughter in Stockton, which she staunchly defends, claiming the media has it in for her town.

They are traveling together now on a sort of grand tour, going to see friends and relatives in Chicago, Washington, D.C., Virginia, and Atlanta. Lilly was married for many years to an Air Force man, and they had seven children and lived all over the world. Jackie remembers being most impressed by the cherry blossoms and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, when their family was stationed in Japan.

Jackie relates stories from her twenty years as a federal corrections officer. She tells us about drug couriers who tried to smuggle their contraband into the country inside dead babies, and about the racketeer Michael Milken, whom she calls a rascal, and Heidi Fleiss, whom she calls ugly and says was stoned when she first reported to prison. She is afraid that she became too paranoid during her years as a guard. She is proud of her knowledge of guns and self-defense, but found that for months

after she retired she would catch herself searching her home for places where someone might conceal a weapon.

The scenery changes the moment we get out of the mountains, the way it does so often across America. From the train, most of Nevada looks like exactly what it is, the bed of an ancient sea, a landscape broken only by the remnants of more bridges, tiny clusters of houses, and distant highways on each side of the tracks. The exposed desert rock glows softly in the dusk, a drowsy, pastel sunset after the dramatic landscapes of the Sierras.

The headlines on the bundles of *USA Today*s brought aboard read HOUSE, SENATE PARRY ON 'OBAMACARE' AS SHUTDOWN LOOMS. It's not of much concern on the California Zephyr. At breakfast, I reminisce with Gene—a devout Nebraska Cornhuskers fan wearing a bright-red team jacket, on his way back to Lincoln, where he has been teaching mathematics for fifty-three years—over Johnny Rodgers's greatest game. At lunch, I talk to Leah and John, both of whom have their pilot's licenses and have lived and worked all over the world in public health, about Mayor Dick Lee and his struggle with the Model Cities program in New Haven, Connecticut. We speculate about a middle-aged couple who hold hands everywhere they go on the Zephyr, and whom everyone wonders about until we realize that the man is blind. I marvel anew at the range of conversations you can have on the train even as you're being Archimeditied into collectivism.

As it happens, the Zephyr is unable to take its usual scenic route through the Rockies because torrential rains have washed out the track near the Moffat Tunnel—the second washout due to extreme weather I've encountered within a week of travel. Suddenly, we are in a tale foretold. Ayn Rand—the devoutly atheist cult leader who has somehow become the prophet of fundamentalist Republicans—loved trains. In her major opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, one of her great heroes of capitalism—her “prime movers”—runs a railroad. In doing research for the book, Rand supposedly rode in locomotives of the New York Central and even operated the engine of the 20th Century Limited, later claiming, “[N]obody touched a lever except me.”

When the prime movers of *Atlas Shrugged* decide to go on strike until they are properly appreciated, trains are transformed into tools of almost biblical retribution. They plunge off a bridge into the Mississippi, or asphyxiate all aboard in a badly ventilated mountain tunnel, or simply stop in an Arizona desert, leaving its passengers and crew to be rescued by a passing wagon train (!).

Here, then, is Rand's prophecy, much echoed in recent years by Republicans from Mitt Romney on down, though usually with reference to Europe. It is finally happening! Our indulgent,



unaffordable welfare state has caused our entire civilization to collapse!

Except the employees of Amtrak have made provisions for this contingency. It turns out that somehow we are not to be choked to death in our compartments or turned out to wander the prairie like so many buffalo, just rerouted through Wyoming, where we will be following the rail bed of the original transcontinental railroad.

**W**e are hustled through the state like Lenin being carted across Germany to Russia in his sealed railway carriage during World War I. No one is allowed off the train at the brief stops, even to stretch their legs, lest we contaminate the good citizens of Cheneyland with our collectivist ways. The only exceptions are a couple of passengers who have brought dogs. We watch enviously from the windows as they cavort through the high prairie grass with their pets during a stop.

Wyoming is almost unbelievably empty, even compared with the rest of the West. Mile after mile, there is nothing: no visible water, no sign of human habitation beyond the snow fences along the tracks, just two steel lines moving across the land. An Army topographic engineer once called the high plains west of the Mississippi the Great American Desert. The region averaged less than twenty inches of rain a year, and much less during its years-long dry spells. Blizzards and long cycles of drought killed off the settlers' cattle. Locusts devoured their crops. Even in the good years, they often lived in sod houses infested with spiders, snakes, and centipedes, and burned buffalo chips as their only source of fuel.

Against this dispiriting reality, the railroads took up with land speculators to turn the Great American Desert into the Great Plains and "the Garden of the World." Posters and pamphlets promised "Riches in the soil, prosperity in the air, progress everywhere. An Empire in the making!" A booster invented that dangerous absurdity, "Rain follows the plough!" The more the settlers churned up the earth, they were promised, the more moisture would be absorbed into the soil and circulated back into the atmosphere. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe insisted that the "rain line" moved west with its tracks, the steam from its engines condensing into clouds. Pseudoscientific properties were attributed to the steel rails themselves, or to the electrical impulses leaping along the new telegraph wires, or even to loud noises. If all that failed, farmers were urged to embrace "dry farming"—plowing furrows twelve to fourteen inches deep, then harrowing their fields after each rainfall.

When it was finally conceded that the West could not be the East, the area was reconceived as

a sort of colossal factory. Almost anything that could be extracted was cut down, torn up, dug out, shipped east by rail, then processed and shipped on again. Between the Civil War and the Great Depression, new industrial booms followed one after the other, in cattle, in timber, in coal and other minerals—even in bison meat. The railroad was, once again, its conveyor.

When World War I disrupted wheat exports from Russia, farmers on the high plains found a bonanza selling their wheat to Europe. They poured their newfound cash into mechanized plows and reapers and tractors and got rid of many of their work animals, freeing up another 32 million arable acres formerly dedicated to pasture. Wheat production grew 300 percent in the 1920s—but all this succeeded in doing was driving down the price of wheat. Desperate farmers responded by plowing up increasingly marginal land. The buffalo grass that had stitched the Western plains together for 35,000 years was gone overnight.

The end was an ecological as well as an economic catastrophe. With the next, entirely predictable cycle of drought, the dust started blowing, in 1932, and didn't stop for a decade. A huge oval of land on the plains, roughly 100 million acres, 400 by 300 miles in size, soon lay desolate. The dust was everywhere, covering farm machinery and entire houses, piled up against barns like Saharan sand drifts. One third of the Dust Bowl's inhabitants—250,000 people—ended up leaving. In a generation, as the historian Donald Worster points out in his book *Dust Bowl*, much of the region had gone "from a spirited home on the range where no discouraging words were heard, to a Santa Fe Chief carrying bounteous heaps of grain to Chicago, and, finally, to an empty shack where the dust had drifted as high as the eaves."

No traces of that devastation can be seen today. The discovery of aquifers (now rapidly being depleted) and the creation of farm subsidies and government conservation and resettlement programs allowed for the land to be restored—at least for the time being.

The trains, too, got taken in hand, by private enterprise and government alike. J. P. Morgan and others snapped up as many lines as they could. Populist and progressive revolts gave the Interstate Commerce Commission unprecedented powers to regulate rates and conditions. With our entry into World War I, every train in the country was nationalized under the U.S. Railroad Administration. This practice proved so efficacious that after the war the ICC proposed a comprehensive national plan to consolidate the rails, though it was never implemented. In the 1920s, the United States still had 1,085 railroad companies. But the mergers of many rail lines during the 1930s and more forced consolidation



by the government during World War II succeeded in creating by the 1940s a more rational system.

The dining car on the Zephyr loses its air-conditioning when its electrical board malfunctions, and the kitchen becomes unbearably overheated. The menu is limited, but the staff remains remarkably helpful, and we are not asphyxiated. We move south, into Colorado, and actually reach Denver early, because of the detour. Dinner is served while we are halted on the tracks just past the center field of the Colorado Rockies' park, Coors Field, finished in 1995 at a cost of \$300 million.

The next morning, we push through into the farm country of Nebraska, then Iowa. The kitchen stays down all the way to Chicago. For a day and a half, and a dozen stops, no one has the wherewithal to fix the malfunction. On board, the bloom is off the rose, thanks to the sheer length of the trip. We resort more and more to the subterranean café car, run this time by Carol, a perpetually angry attendant, who treats any efforts at empathy with marked hostility. When someone remarks that she will surely be glad to see Chicago at the end of the sweaty, fifty-three-hour voyage of the Zephyr, Carol snaps, "Why? I hate the city!"

I skip the Metropolitan Lounge on the trip back to New York, preferring to sit in a dark, beery commuter bar in Chicago's Union Station. But the Lake Shore Limited is cheery and bright, and another helpful steward serves us complimentary wine and cheese.

He gives a leftover half bottle to a couple in their thirties. They laugh and smile and hold hands in the club car. They speak glowingly about all they have seen on the way out to Spokane, where Lisa had a speaking engagement, and back, the lights of the oil and gas fields at night in North Dakota, the beauty of Glacier National Park by day.

Eric works mostly in Maryland and Washington, but he owns a home and fifty acres in Binghamton, New York. He's hoping that it will attract a fracking company—the great dream of everyone in upstate New York not looking to hook up with one of the four casinos recently promised to the region—and he dismisses any environmental concerns: "If you look at the science, it's perfectly safe."

In the morning, we pass the ruined cities of upstate New York again. By afternoon we are headed back down through the dappled autumn loveliness of the Hudson, to New York City and Penn Station. We plunge back under Riverside Park, the sort of structure we used to routinely build above our buried trains, with what was then our endless talent for practical and gracious innovation. But today a journey of more than 7,000 miles, into our greatest

city, ends where it began, the disembarking passengers staggering along a drab, dimly lit concrete platform. "One entered the city like a god; one scuttles in now like a rat," wrote the architectural historian Vincent Scully after the original Penn Station was torn down, in 1963.

That building, designed by Stanford White, was a symphony in glass and steel, clad in pink Milton granite and honey-colored Travertine; lit through lunette windows, and festooned with clocks and map murals of the great nation it stood in tribute to. It was something "vast enough to hold the sound of time," as Thomas Wolfe wrote in *You Can't Go Home Again*.

But when it was thought that something more profitable might be built in its stead, its vaulted glass roofs were smashed with wrecking balls and its granite and marble walls were jackhammered to pieces. Its graceful Greek columns were sawed through, and its great clocks, its carved-stone eagles, and the maiden sculptures that represented Night and Day were pulled down and taken over to New Jersey, where they were dumped in the



swamps of Secaucus, like the body of a murdered mob stoolie.

"The message was terribly clear," Ada Louise Huxtable wrote in the *New York Times*. "Tossed into that Secaucus graveyard were about 25 centuries of classical culture and the standards of style, elegance and grandeur that it gave to the dreams and constructions of Western man."

In addition to being beautiful, the old station was the pinnacle of an immense technological achievement, a vast network of infrastructure that included two rail tunnels under the Hudson River, four more under the East River, and the

Traveling north through central Oregon on a Coast Starlight from Emeryville, California, to Portland





Hell Gate Bridge. To build the Hudson tunnels alone, crews of sandhogs dug toward each other beneath the river for three years, under intense heat and pressure, behind 200-ton iron cylinders or shields. Finally, “the shields met, coming together rim to rim,” in the words of the historian Lorraine Diehl, “like two gargantuan tumblers.” For the first time, America was connected by rail from Montauk to San Francisco.

“It was one of those rare architectural masterpieces that are able to touch man’s soul,” Diehl wrote of the station that so fittingly crowned it. “Built as a landmark, it was a monumental gateway meant to last through centuries.”

Instead, it lasted a little more than fifty-three years. When the decision was announced, in 1962, the only protesters were some 200 people, mostly architects and academics. Few others seemed to care. Officials posed smiling for pictures next to the lowered eagles. “Just another job,” said John Rezin, the foreman of the demolition crew. “Fifty years from now, when it’s time for our Center to be torn down, there will be a new group of architects who will protest,” Irving Felt, president of the Madison Square Garden Corporation, predicted.

It has been another fifty years, and not only architects but many New Yorkers in general would gladly take Madison Square Garden apart by hand if it meant a chance to see a new Penn Station rise. But nothing gets done. The Garden was stuck atop the grave of the old Penn Station back in the 1960s because white commuters were supposedly too afraid to venture very far into the big, bad, black city—about as terrible a perversion of urban planning as has ever been practiced. Ironically, the scariest people around the new Penn Station are the drunken suburban louts in their Rangers jerseys on game night.

Plans for building a twenty-first-century train station in the Beaux Arts central post office across Eighth Avenue from the Garden have been on the books for twenty years now. Architects have churned out any number of wondrous fantasies of what a new station might look like. But the Garden and its teams are owned by a thuggish cable-TV heir who stubbornly holds out against any intrusion on his ugly cash cow. Amtrak, citing money worries, still hasn’t fully committed to the proposed new facility, to be dubbed Moynihan Station (in honor of former New York senator Daniel Patrick Moyni-

han, a leading rail advocate), and all the grand plans aside, it’s unclear what passengers would get in the end—maybe just a bigger Amshack.

As one state official told the *New York Times* architecture critic Michael Kimmelman in 2012, the “project aspires to be more like the Frank R. Lautenberg Station in Secaucus, N.J.”

**W**e have always been a country of boom and bust, and a rail has always run through our wildest schemes. The train was a wonderful tool that came into being before anyone, even the men who owned it, really knew what to do with it. As with the rest of our democracy, it was the learning, the mastering of these men and their machines, that would eventually provide us with some measure of what this country has always personified.

We did incredible things with trains. We ran them through mountains and deserts and under rivers and swank avenues and beautiful buildings. We turned them into rolling luxury hotels and made them into something so extraordinary that adults as well as children came running just to watch them as they passed. We learned how to coast them into stations without their locomotives and how to string whole cities of commerce around them. We looked a hundred, two hundred, three hundred years into the future, and built railroads to match our vision. Then we discarded trains as something hopelessly antiquated and unnecessary.

The America we live in today does not even have the political will to connect a train to a platform in many places, much less build a new generation of supertrains. Amtrak and its supporters remain confident that it can endure, even triumph, and they may be right. Trains still have advocates even in the reddest of Western states, and unlike so many of the public-sector areas that the right’s corporate sponsors would like to fully privatize—education, health care, prisons—no one seems eager to get their hands on a passenger rail system.

But the odds are just as good that Amtrak will vanish completely. Against the rigid ideology that now drives the Republican Party, the old politics of horse-trading and constituent services may not suffice. The government shutdown ended twelve days after we pulled back into the bowels of Penn Station, a big defeat for the Tea Party movement. But within weeks, its memory was obliterated by the Obama Administration’s botched rollout of its already woeful health-care plan. The unwillingness of the Democratic leadership to commit to any public good has already disfigured the liberal idea, and its continuing failure may well sweep our national rail service away, along with everything else. For all Amtrak’s shortcomings, losing it would be a very bad thing. The train muddles through wonderfully, given all the restrictions we put on it. We are capable of more—or at least we used to be. ■

Pennsylvania Station, New York City, 1944 © Museum of the City of New York/The Granger Collection, New York City



# GOOD PILGRIMS

Why Mexican immigrants are moving back home

By Sarah Menkedick



**A**s you leave the Valley of Oaxaca and wind up the narrow switch-backs of unpaved mountain road, the sun loses its lowland sultriness and grows sharp. Roadside stands appear, selling small peaches, and bantam

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villages pass into and out of view, offering glimpses of hanging laundry, calla lilies in mossy streams, and men joking around in half-built houses. Farther inland, their language switches from the romantic lilt of Spanish to the tonal precision of Zapotec.

Crammed in the back of a *taxi colectivo*, a bare-bones Nissan Tsuru that held a few other passengers and

their striped bags of city bounty, my husband, Jorge, and I watched the glitter of the valley fade and the perpetual fog of the cloud forest close in. Our destination was only fifty-five miles from the city of Oaxaca, but the trip would take more than three hours. We were headed to the village of San Pedro Cajonos for its annual fiesta, which included a basketball





tournament Jorge planned to photograph for a documentary project. I had taken a semester off graduate school to accompany him on his travels. We had spent much of the winter attending fiestas in villages throughout the Sierra Norte, a historically impoverished region in the center of Oaxaca, one of Mexico's southernmost states.

We knew to expect long days and sleepless nights. I was readying myself for all the men who would approach and ask, "*De dónde eres?*" then tell me they'd been in Helena, or Indianapolis, or Los Angeles, and now had come back—who would struggle to explain why, then shrug and gesture at tortillas swaddled in cloth or sweeping landscapes of corrugated peaks.

A mix of indigenous tradition and Catholic ritual, the fiesta honors the birthday of a pueblo's patron saint. It is the most important an-

nual event in the mountain villages of Oaxaca—three or four days of nonstop celebration, ranging from the somber (dressing an effigy of the saint in new clothes) to the uproarious (bull riding accompanied by brass bands). People who have moved to the city flood back to their hometowns, while migrants in the United States send money for food, drink, and other supplies. The fiesta is the jubilant affirmation of an identity distinct from that of mainstream Mexico: in the Sierra Norte, people dance to traditional *sones y jarabes*; play basketball; speak Chinantec, Mixe, or Zapotec; and maintain a unique system of direct democracy called *usos y costumbres*.

The fiesta has its roots in the mid-sixteenth-century arrival of the Spanish, who whipped villagers for "idolatry" and forced them to worship Catholic saints rather than animistic gods. The Church succeeded in sup-

planting the idols, but not in extinguishing the customs or the exuberance: in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, bishops visiting the Mixe region of the Sierra Norte sent irate letters back to Spain bemoaning the fact that more attention was being paid to dance, food, and fireworks than to saintly devotion.

The Sierra saw its economic peak in the late 1700s, with the harvesting of the cochineal, a ticklike insect that grows on cactus pads and is used to produce carmine dye, which was briefly fashionable in Europe. Following the development of synthetic dyes, the Sierra, one of the least accessible regions of the New World, sank into decline and was largely neglected by the colonial and then the Mexican state. A wave of northward migration began, cresting in the late twentieth century. The number of U.S.-bound migrants doubled in the 1980s, and again in





the 1990s, nearly emptying villages of their young men. Now many of those who left are returning to the Sierra. I met them everywhere—over adobo chicken in cramped kitchens, at rodeos and basketball tournaments, and amid the clamor of *bandas* in churches heavy with flowers and gilt.

Romeo Robles was one of these men, and the only one I kept in touch with later, long after I left Mexico. We'd met briefly two years earlier, at a party held by mutual friends in Oaxaca city. He had come home to Mexico that very day after fifteen years in the United States, and was heading to San Pedro Cajonos, to a life he'd left in 1995, at twenty, and since longed for with increasing intensity. Jorge and I were on our way to the United States—me for the first time as an adult out of college, after six years overseas, him for the first time ever.

Had Romeo been a tourist, newly back from Asia or South America, I might have quizzed him about his travels, assumed some sort of personal transformation. But like many Americans, I categorized the journeys of migrants as matters of economic necessity, neither spiritual nor existential in nature. This is how many migrants, too, imagine their pilgrimages before they leave: they will cross the border, earn some money, have some adventures, then return home to build a house and start a family. Only later do they realize how much more complex their lives have become.

Shortly after Jorge and I arrived in San Pedro and began wandering the roller-coaster inclines of its streets, we ran into Romeo. His eyes seemed to swell at the sight of us. "I didn't even recognize you," he said. This was the start of our friendship.

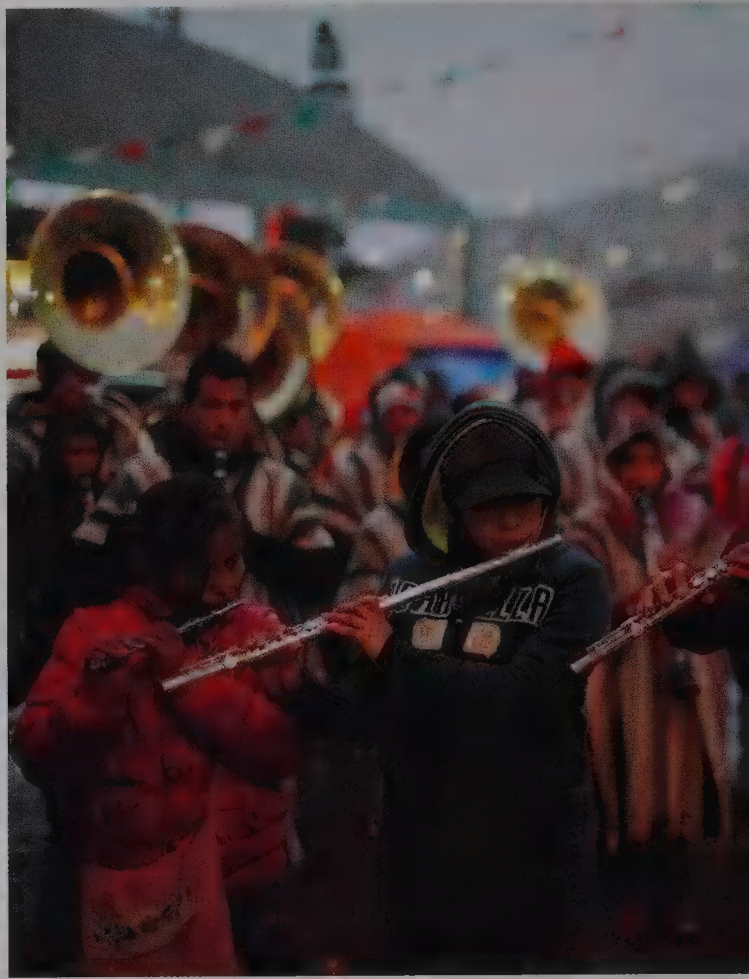
He invited us to his house around the corner. It reflected his relative

wealth: two stories, a kitchen with a gas stove, and a big living room with couches. Marketing books from his American college courses sat on wooden shelves. He poured us glasses of watermelon water, fleshy and seed-filled, and his mother and sisters served us rice, potato croquettes, and the standard thick tortillas wrapped in cloth. "They're going to donate a bull right now," he said when we'd finished, and proposed that we go see it.

**P**ast some nearby shops and pottery stands, we found the bull, a zebu, tied to a tree by the side of the road. Layers of flesh aproned his neck and chest. His ears were floppy, his eyes sad. A festive bow was fastened around his neck. A migrant in Los Angeles had donated him; he would feed everyone at the fiesta over the next several days.

En route to the church, where the bull would later be blessed, we





stopped in at an improvised cantina. A few old men, bleary with beer and mezcal, hunched over some folding tables while younger men clustered outside and observed the intermittent traffic: a mototaxi carrying a woman with an armful of flowers, trucks whose tarp-covered beds were full of *campesinos* returning home from the fields or arriving from out of town for the fiesta. We sat by the window, and a young guy popped open three Coronas and handed them to us.

I asked Romeo what the bull's donor did in Los Angeles. The man worked with glass, he replied. He was talented with design and color, but earned most of his money from marijuana pipes. "He tells me, 'I don't even smoke!'" Romeo said.

We were interrupted by the sound of a *banda* in the distance. (The groups were such a festival commonplace that Jorge and I became accustomed to walking up a hill and seeing the bell of a tuba rising over its crest, followed by a dozen red-cheeked kids playing their way toward breakfast.) We stood and gazed through the windows, picking out between the concrete-and-adobe houses a loose

procession of clarinets, cymbals, drums, and horns, followed by señoras with gladioli, then sundry villagers, and then a group of men pulling on ropes, yanking hard against the force of something stubborn and heavy. Two, three, four men with tense faces—and then a second donated bull came into view. Bow around its neck, the animal trotted up to the men as though to taunt them. They retreated to get the ropes tight again, then resumed moving laboriously uphill. Soon the bull thrashed a second time and charged the men, who once again dispersed.

Jorge excused himself to go take photos, and Romeo began speaking to me in English. "You see all of those houses?" he asked. The village hugged a concave stretch of mountainside, its homes perched above cornfields and scattered around the narrow roads. Many were freshly painted—burgundy, canary yellow, pink—and two or three stories tall, with windows taking in the generous view. "They're almost all empty," he said. "Built by migrants.... *Puras casas vacias*. Ghost houses." Men and women working in the United States would send money back to construct

expensive homes, then find themselves unwilling or unable to return.

"Do the migrants come back for the fiesta?" I asked.

"Those with papers, yeah," he said. "But the others, no. It's too difficult."

Romeo had spent the previous year working as the village secretary. It was a *cargo* (literally, "burden"), an obligatory job delegated to him by his pueblo's assembly under *usos y costumbres*, in which each citizen ascends a hierarchy of mandatory unpaid civic and religious duties—starting, for example, as a municipal errand runner or policeman and eventually becoming secretary, president, *mayordomo* (the host of the fiesta), or *fiscal de iglesia* (church treasurer). *Cargos*, which last for a year, have in the past been assigned only to men, by men. The more significant ones demanded uncompromising sacrifice.

In Los Angeles, Romeo had worked with a hometown association of fellow migrants from San Pedro. They remitted money for development projects and the fiesta, thereby exempting themselves from *cargos* and *tequios*—smaller daily or weekly jobs. In some villages, if a migrant didn't return to

Left: A young man holding the skull of a rodeo bull, San Pedro Cajonos, Oaxaca.  
Right: A traditional brass band playing "Las Mañanitas," a Mexican birthday song, to the village patron saint, Santa María Tlahuitoltepec, Oaxaca





showed up, a Mother's Day party was under way. He watched everyone celebrating and felt almost foreign.

"You know how in the U.S., *no puedes pasar en la back yard?*" he asked me. "You have to go in the street. You can't walk in the back yard." He no longer knew San Pedro's back yards. As a kid he would slink through cornfields, around and behind houses, with the implicit understanding that he was free to do so. Now people saw him as changed, as someone who thought differently, and they were right. But he wanted to be seen as the Romeo Robles who still spoke Zapotec, and who had chosen to come home.

When he began his *cargo*, he became the center of attention. Everywhere he went he was invited in for a meal, and his resocialization picked up speed. People had to know who he was and why he had come back. Why did he speak Zapotec when he seemed so alien? Why was he so eager to know them after being gone so long?

He started spending time with a group of returned migrants: two men who'd been living in Los Angeles, and several who'd been in big Mexi-

can cities. They were excited by the possibilities, brainstorming small ecotourist ventures, arts programs, scholarships. They started work on a picturesque *cabaña* in the cloud forest. And they received funding from Oaxaca's ministry of social development to build a *farmacia viva*—a garden from which they could make holistic medicines. One of them had a *cargo* as the commissary of communal lands, and he got a grant from the national forestry commission to plant 25,000 trees.

The biggest initiative Romeo helped push through in his year as secretary was the remodeling of the village's elementary school, including the construction of a roof over its basketball court. The project had been started fifteen years earlier by the San Pedro hometown association in the United States, and it was completed with the help of Mexico's three-for-one program, which supplies three dollars of funding for every dollar of migrant investment in infrastructure projects. In 2008, as head of the hometown association, Romeo had put together dances and sold *tlayudas* and *tortas* on the streets of Los Angeles. Between this fund-raising

fulfill his *cargo*, he and his family could be ostracized, his land seized. Romeo had been able to make a life in the United States without losing his place in the village. But it had been a challenge to come back and take on a major *cargo* right as he was struggling to readjust. Assigning important duties to recent returnees was fairly common in villages in the Sierra. It was a mix of pragmatism—migrants are often the most worldly, enterprising, and educated men in their villages—and revenge against their having pursued destinies elsewhere.

At first Romeo had chafed. He had returned to San Pedro for good on May 10, 2010. When he





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and other donations, San Pedro migrants raised \$30,000. There would be a ribbon-cutting ceremony the following morning at the primary school.

It began to drizzle. We decided to go see the first bull, now tied up behind the church. A mass was taking place, so we followed the sound of the priest's monotone, which was being broadcast over the village by a loudspeaker. We passed the bull and took cover from the weather in a small shrine. It was new, with aluminum-framed glass walls. At its back stood the figure of San Pedro, staring solemnly over a flock of wavering candle flames. Beside him was a small gold Virgin. We sat in a corner next to two buckets of yellow wax tailings, and I asked Jorge to tell me about the saint.

"He has the keys to the sky," he said. "He decides who enters." The rain outside was quiet and consistent. On a hill above the church sat a cemetery, where bowed villagers adjusted memorials or laid flowers.

Romeo had chosen to try his luck in the United States after a cousin, Everardo, told Romeo he was planning to cross with his sister, Maricela, who had papers and a job in Los Angeles. "Let's go to L.A.," Everardo said. "You'll make a little money." The United States was everywhere in San Pedro. Migrants were visiting in new clothes: jeans, Nikes, Starter jackets. They were different, not just in their wealth but in their manners and attitudes. Instead of "*Dónde me voy a estacionar?*" ("Where am I going to park?") they asked "*Dónde voy a parquear?*" They said they were going "*a ver movies*" or "*a ponerse unos jeans*," the foreign terms set like gems amid their Spanish. Romeo didn't know at the time that they didn't really speak English, but back then—his eyes widened as he told us the story, emulating his teenage self—"Wow. *Me gusta, me gusta.*"

The day he crossed over, the U.S. Border Patrol had encircled his group of twenty or so migrants as they scrambled up a dusty hill past a fence just outside Tijuana. An agent grabbed his ankle, but Romeo kicked him off and ran. He spent hours roaming the desert before reaching a safe house in San

Diego. From there, he made the trip to Los Angeles crammed with seven others into a false compartment in the back of a van.

Maricela worked as a maid at the mansion of Yousuf Tar, the billionaire president of the high-end men's-fashion company Bernini, and she soon secured jobs for Romeo and Everardo. The Tar Mahal, as it was known locally, had sixteen and a half bathrooms, fifteen bedrooms, a twenty-car garage, a theater with balconies, a cigar room, a fountain, a gazebo, a pool complex, a piazza, a spa, and a koi pond. In 2009, Michael Jackson considered buying it for \$38 million; the blog Curbed LA described it as "Marie Antoinette by way of the Sultan [of] Brunei on a Vegas bender."

Romeo worked there twelve hours a day, six days a week, sweeping floors, washing windows, cleaning bathrooms. He, Everardo, and Maricela lived in the basement with a Salvadoran woman and a German shepherd named Bingo. Romeo earned \$500 a month. He had Sundays off but nothing to do with his free time. He felt like he was in jail. So one Sunday morning he walked away from the Tar Mahal and found a job in *la costura*: the sewing factories, where many migrants wind up. He worked there for seven years, making ten cents per pair of jeans while trying to put himself through school.

Romeo graduated in 2003 from East Los Angeles College with a two-year degree, then attempted to go on to California State University, Los Angeles, to complete a four-year degree. He was kicked out of school when the IRS flagged the Social Security number on his tuition form. Eventually he re-enrolled as an international student, but he couldn't afford the higher tuition. And then, nine years after he crossed the border, while he was working as a busboy at a billiards bar in Santa Monica, he received a call from Everardo, who said he was going back to Oaxaca. He asked whether Romeo wanted his job as a gardener for a wealthy couple in Pacific Palisades.

The couple eventually took him on full-time, inviting him to live with them and to manage their house and



staff. They became like family, eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner together. Romeo grew so comfortable in Palisades, and so impervious to neighbors' stares, that he would skateboard around the empty streets in the afternoons, towed by the family's Labrador. When his boss discovered that Romeo hadn't finished school, he helped him apply to Loyola Marymount University and covered his tuition. Romeo graduated with a degree in business administration in 2008.

At LMU, he'd dreamed of being a CEO. But having cleared several significant hurdles, he began to question himself more deeply than he had since arriving, wondering what tied him to the United States, and what he really needed. He had a great job and an education, but he wasn't happy. Life there was worth it, he decided, if you believed in it. And he no longer believed.

So he left, becoming one of the 1.4 million migrants who returned to Mexico from the United States between 2005 and 2010—nearly double the number who'd done so between 1995 and 2000. Just two years after he got back, net migration to the United States from Mexico dropped to zero for the first time in four decades.

Before leaving, Romeo tried to pay back his boss.

The man refused and said, "Go and find what you're looking for."

A truck came up the narrow cobblestone road to the church and stopped just before the plaza.

"Those are migrants," said Romeo. "The first thing they do is come to the church."

The bull was gone, blessed and off to be butchered. We left the grounds and walked toward Romeo's house. The *casa de la mayordomía* came into view, a huge, four-story structure whose third floor was level with the street. We could see its kitchen, a cafeteria-style room with a wall of windows opening onto a large patio of poured concrete. Men stood outside, carving out the bull's viscera. One of the men stretched tight the tissue holding the liver in place, then sliced through it, loosed the organ, and low-

ered it into a blue bucket. "Look," Romeo said. "He's still moving."

Later Jorge and I were invited to sit in the dining room of the *casa de la mayordomía*, eating beef soup elbow to elbow with señoras in thick shawls and men wearing Oakland A's caps, sipping mezcal against the cold as we looked out at the Sierra. Everywhere we'd gone in these mountains, we'd been met with unquestioning generosity. Only once had I encountered hostility about my home country, over another bowl of beef, when my host, who had just returned from Denver, looked at me with disdain and said, "*La vida allá es suave*" ("Life there is easy"). His tone was full of accusation.

"*Allá hay money, no?*" he asked. I nodded. "*Aquí no hay money,*" he said.

It was a hard, essential fact: there is money on one side of the border and not on the other. But still, he had returned for good. He was hosting a meal at his house, feeding the hundreds of people coming in and out while women spooned steaming broth into red clay bowls and brought out tortillas. He carried case after case of beer onto his patio, and apart from the brief moment of tension during our conversation, he seemed relaxed and happy to be where he was. What mattered to him and the other returning migrants was here: the fiesta, the beef soup elbow to elbow, the birthday song "*Las Mañanitas*" at five A.M. as the sun rose behind the church, the waltzes on a basketball court in the fog, the rain of candy from balconies. "Here, people will always offer you beans," one migrant told me. "There, if you don't have your ninety-nine cents, you're not worth anything."

Once, I asked Romeo why he'd majored in business. "When I was growing up," he said, "I wanted to understand how money works. Who makes the money? Old men? I couldn't understand it. How is it possible that some people have all the money, and they are in charge of giving it to others?"

What he found was "*te dan gato por liebre*": they give you cat and tell you it's hare. They rip you off. He shrugged, then affected the tone of an American man on the street. "What do you do for a living?" he asked.

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He replied as himself.

"I'm not doing anything.  
I'm just living."

**B**y eleven p.m., the few lights from cantinas and taco stands seemed like oases; households retired into themselves and animals huntered down. We made our way to Cafeteria Lupita, part funky bar, part cave, part den of oddities: basketball trophies, deer heads, painted masks, dancing-girl figurines. The walls were encrusted with varnished river stones.

Romeo greeted the owner and ordered us *micheladas*, ice-cold beers spiced with chili, lime, and salsa. We talked about the pizzerias in Venice Beach and how they were full of Oaxaqueños—ones who spoke Zapotec and ones who insisted they'd forgotten how. "*Muchos Chicanos*," Romeo said, "don't want to know their roots. When it comes down to it, you choose where you want to be from. You choose. Family, country, all of that doesn't matter. There are things that pull on you." The term he used was "*lazo*," which can mean either a lasso or a connection to something or somewhere. Romeo felt a *lazo con inglés*. He had been drawn in by many things in the United States, he said: the food, the television, the fantasy.

We were interrupted by a man with a thick white bandage wrapped around his head. Romeo stood up, shook hands, and gestured at the bandage.

"*Qué pasó?*"

"I got robbed in Oaxaca," his friend said. "A guy hit me upside the head with a pistol." He'd spent several days in the hospital; now he was going to the back room to shoot some pool and drink.

"*Tranquilo*," Romeo said reassuringly. "Nothing can happen to you here. There's no violence here." It was true; pueblo life seemed tranquil in the extreme. Too tranquil, one migrant had said to me—verging on stagnant.

Romeo said "*tranquilo*" with the afterglow of recent conversion in his voice. There was pride in the way he said it—he was showing off for us, talking up his pueblo—but there was also the need to convince himself of the vision of his village he had returned for.

The bandaged friend disappeared through the swinging wooden doors, passing into what was still an essentially male realm. My presence spoke to vast changes in the pueblo; twenty or thirty years ago, a woman, even a foreign woman, in the cantina would have been unthinkable. It was still taboo for women to drink like men, but the migrants took for granted that I could hold my own. They had brought back with them the understanding that it wasn't unusual in the United States for a woman to drink or have male friends. As one rough-faced former bricklayer told me ruefully, "In your country there are *lots* of laws to protect women." Chauvinism is still pervasive in Oaxaca, particularly in rural areas, but returned migrants have helped bring about some stunning advancements. Last June, Romeo and several friends succeeded in persuading the all-male village assembly in San Pedro not only to allow women to vote but also to assign them *cargos*. The town now has its first female president.

"One more before bed?" Romeo asked.

Jorge assented quickly. "Okay! One more and we'll call it a night."

Looking at me, Romeo switched to English.

"You know, I had it all," he said. "I did it all. I had a college education. I had a good job. I had a car. I had a house. But where do I get my happiness? In Target? In Gap?" He leaned forward now with urgency as the waiter set down three beers.

"I was living in a place where they were living the American dream," he said. "They had cars, houses, this perfect place! It was *una jaula de oro*." A golden cage.

It was a speech, the rhetoric by now perfected. The dream, the disillusionment, the golden cage. Spouted by my compatriots, these were platitudes. But Romeo's account felt true. America had failed to sustain some deeper sense of spirit. The meaning he sought in Oaxaca, however, was tangled up with the poverty he'd fled. Many returned migrants were as shocked by the corruption, the inefficiencies, and the marginalization they found in Mexico as they'd first been by the scope of cultural differ-



ence they'd experienced in the United States. And so they struggled in the in-between, a state the psychiatrist Celia Falicov has called "living with two hearts."

The cantina's owner gathered our empties, still caked with ice.

"One more before bed?" Romeo asked.

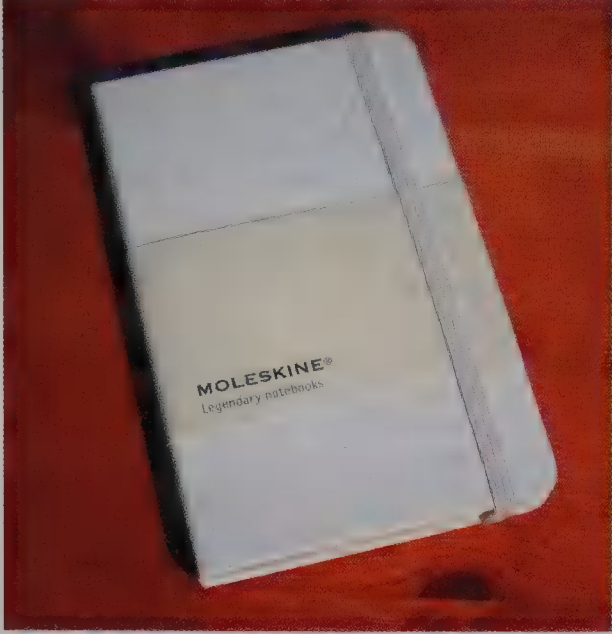
"One more," said Jorge.


We awoke the following morning in time to attend the inauguration ceremony for the elementary school's new basketball court. A stream of bureaucrats extolled the honor and virtue of migrants; the few migrants in attendance stood by awkwardly. Afterward, we went with most of the pueblo to a half-built ghost house where señoras were serving beef *barbacoa* and *champurrado*, one of Mexico's many ancient sustaining beverages made of ground corn. As we ate, Romeo told us there would be a *calenda*, a parade, at six P.M.

Several years back in the United States had eroded Jorge's and my awareness of how Mexican time tends to function, so we naïvely showed up at the church at six. At first it looked as though the parade might actually start at the designated hour. Women picked their way uphill, balancing baskets of carefully arranged flowers on their heads, and a group of men held up a towering papier-mâché *mona* while another man slipped inside. There were two of the costumes—a female figure with traditional braids and a bright-green *huipil* tunic, and a male with a bumpkin's grin and a checkered shirt—and they tottered at first, their huge faces leering suddenly at passersby or tipping haughtily upward. Then the men found their rhythm, and the *monas* swung their hollow arms and moved uphill in time with everyone else. (The costumes pass in the course of a festival from man to man. Once, at a fiesta in Nuevo Zoochiapan, a man's eye peeked out at me from the fly of a *mona*'s enormous jeans. "*Hola, preciosa*," he said. Later I saw his hand reach out to accept a shot of mezcal.)

Six o'clock came and went. There was a long mass to bless the dancers and initiate the parade, and as night fell a new sermon drifted over the

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# SOLUTION TO THE JUNE PUZZLE

## NOTES FOR "FULL CIRCLE"

Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov.  
 Note: \* indicates an anagram.

The twelve unclued entries are words beginning with the abbreviations of months: JANITOR, FEBRILE, MARINE, APRICOT, MAYHEM, JUNIPER, JULEP, AUGMENT, SEPULCHRE, OCTANE, NOVENA, and DECENT.

J	U	N	I	P	E	R	N	O	V	E	N	A
A	G	E	N	D	A	E	A	R	E	D	U	U
N	P	A	C	T	T	A	P	E	R	I	N	G
I	M	P	R	E	S	S	I	O	N	I	S	M
T	A	S	E	R	S	S	I	Z	A	B	L	E
O	C	T	A	N	E	A	S	E	L	M	I	N
R	A	T	S	S	P	I	N	D	R	I	F	T
M	M	O	E	J	U	L	E	P	O	N	E	D
A	P	O	D	A	L	F	E	B	R	I	L	E
Y	A	L	E	R	C	A	R	C	A	D	I	C
H	G	B	I	G	H	T	S	A	B	I	N	E
E	N	A	M	O	R	E	A	I	B	S	E	N
M	A	R	I	N	E	A	P	R	I	C	O	T

ACROSS: 11. hidden; 12. (r)earred; 13. homophone; 15. tape-ring; 16. I'm(press)10-ni sm(rev.); 17. \*; 19. \*; 26. rev.; 28. spin-Dr-if-t; 31. (d)one-D; 33. \*; 36. (r)elay, rev.; 37. \*; 38. b(l)ight; 39. hidden; 41. roman\*(c)e, rev.; 42. Nesbi(t), rev.

DOWN: 2. \*; 3. \*; 4. (s)eats; 5. \*; 6. two mngs.; 7. hidden; 8. ve(r)nal; 9. two mngs.; 14. homophone; 20. hidden; 21. li(tter)-feline; 23. c.-Am-pagna\*; 24. first letters; 25. M(in)I(-D.(is)C.; 27. loot(rev.)-bar; 30. j(ust)-argon; 34. fa(vori)te; 35. bar(rev.)-bi; 39. rev.; 40. homophone.



village. Drumbeats rose from the *casa de la mayordomía*, and in the distance, on black hillsides no longer distinguishable from the sky, the pueblo's lights brightened and winked.

Finally the mass ended. The villagers brought out the saint and propped him up in the back of a white truck with California plates, and women climbed in after him or assembled behind. Each had a number pinned to her shirt or her flower basket; the best dancer would be awarded a prize.

The languor of the preceding hours had passed. The *calenda* began swiftly making its way downhill. The first stop was the house where we'd eaten breakfast. The women danced demurely and stoically, one hand on their skirts and the other on the baskets. The crowd watched, dutiful and admiring, until the hands on the baskets reached inside and began chucking *dulces*. An old lady next to me scavenged hard candies from the concrete with quick hands, shoving them into her apron pockets. "I got one—strawberry!" she said, rubbing her scalp. "But one got me, too."

Another volley of candies rained down on us, and everyone groped along the ground, trying to bring up suckers in the shape of chickens and beer mugs, rolls of spicy tamarind, and bubblegum and milky caramels.

Then we were all off and marching along to a new house, a new spot in the street, and the cycle repeated.

**T**he next morning, everyone would wake before sunrise and gather at the church. Men would hoist the saint on their shoulders, stepping out into the cold and quiet as the band struck up "Las Mañanitas." I missed all this, instead sleeping until ten A.M., worn out by the fiesta's incredible persistence.

I had seen "Las Mañanitas" weeks before, in Totontepec. Carrying flowers, I walked in a slow-moving procession under rising light, past gardens of sour-orange trees and tangled rose bushes. Two old women walked behind me. One was carrying a small green pot made in the village of Arzola. It was full of burning incense that moved in thin wisps around her face. The women were whispering.

"Ave María, protégenos. Ave María, sálvanos," they were saying. "Hail Mary, protect us. Hail Mary, save us."

Up ahead, fireworks rocketed into the darkest part of the sky. We rounded a massive rock outcropping, and suddenly the entire Sierra was spread before us as if from behind a magician's cape: range after range in purple and blue. The sun rose beyond them, as if all the mountains had been rolled out to introduce the morning. The women kept whispering, and a firecracker whinnied and burst at the bottom of the hill. For a moment I was weak-kneed with gratitude: my ego and the earthly swagger of my life, my culture, momentarily hollowed out by a great humility.

We proceeded to the church, where I returned my flowers to a señora to be reused. People poured in, and I hovered at the entrance as the service began and the priest read villagers' prayers from slips of paper:

"For protection, work, and good health for the Alcantara family."

"Good health for the Méndez family, and may their children find work."

"For his work in *los Estados Unidos del Norte*, may nothing happen to him."

"May God continue to bless him, even though he is living in Los Angeles, California."

**O**n the eve of the saint's birthday, the fiesta in San Pedro moved to the basketball court, which served as the village's stage, arena, ballroom, arcade, park, and central command. "Quieres bailar?" Romeo asked. We moved onto the court below, not touching as we made our way through the surging crowd, then stopped and faced each other. I put my hands stiffly on his shoulders; he put his lightly on my waist. The band was playing *sones y jarabes*, which are notoriously difficult to dance to. Every two minutes, the rhythm seemed to change, the steps changing with it: from two steps to three, from front to back, from a sideways twist to a passing embrace. I struggled to keep up, lagging and lurching, and we laughed. "It's okay, you're doing fine," Romeo said. "You're good."

We seemed to question each other: How much did he know of my world, and how much did I know of his? *El*

*otro lado*—the other side—was no longer the dream of escape and dollars but the much more complicated return. Romeo and many of his fellow migrants understood the need for a new way of living, carved from a space between the two worlds: not fully here, in poverty and tradition, and not fully there, in emptiness and wealth. The space between the quick steps our feet made to the *sones y jarabes*.

The *calenda* moved on, downhill from the basketball court, across a small river, and up again to the summit of a hill. Eventually, Jorge and I fumbled our way back through the pueblo's consuming darkness, up the narrow, twisting dirt paths, across the silent yard, and upstairs to our thin mattress and the welcoming poof of our sleeping bags. At three or four, when the night was at its thickest, we heard the *calenda* go past. The band was still vivid and glorious, the dancing, talking crowd clumped together. A wave of triumphant noise crashed over us in half-sleep, and soon was absorbed by our dreams. ■

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# BORDERLANDS

Photographs from Hidalgo County

By Kirsten Luce



The Rio Grande Valley, in southern Texas, is the busiest thoroughfare in the United States for human smuggling. As many as 4,500 migrants, mostly from Central America, are apprehended there each week. In the spring and summer of 2013, Kirsten Luce accompanied Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office and San Juan Police Department personnel on raids of stash houses, where migrants are held by smugglers after crossing the Rio Grande but before circumventing the U.S. Border Patrol station in Falfurrias. Migrants may remain in a stash house for anywhere between one day and two weeks while they wait for their families to wire the smugglers extortionate fees of up to \$7,000.

Above: Forty-two migrants are discovered in a two-room stash house in San Juan, Texas, with no running water. Daytime temperatures approached a hundred degrees.

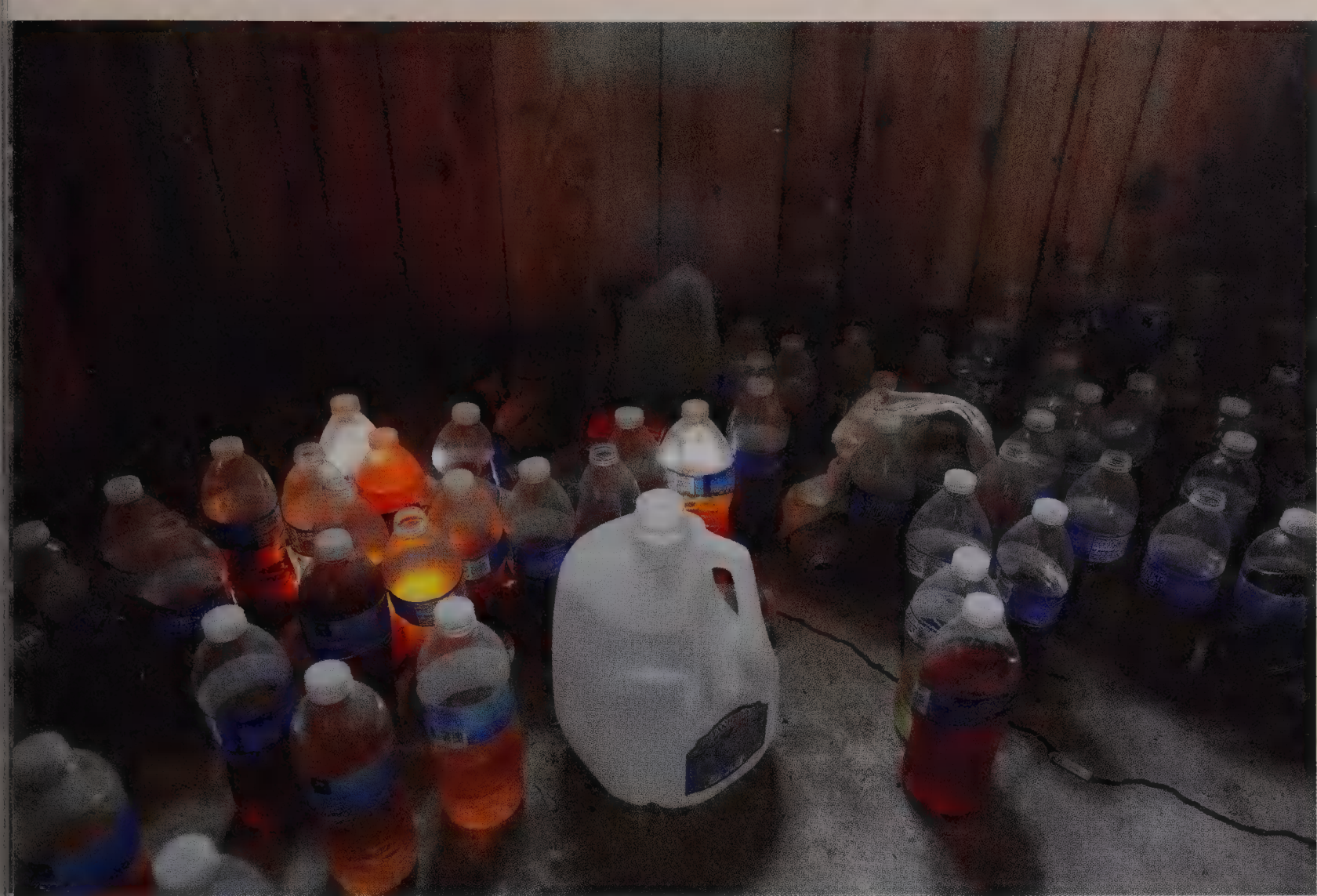
*Kirsten Luce is a photographer based in New York City.*





Migrants discovered by local law enforcement in a stash house in San Juan, Texas, are taken to a Border Patrol station to await deportation. Migrants outside a stash house following a raid





Bottles of urine left in a house in San Juan, Texas  
A migrant found hiding in a closet in an apartment temporarily converted into a stash house





After successfully crossing the Rio Grande, some migrants spend their first nights in a makeshift camp. Smugglers typically locate such camps in rural areas, where neighbors are less likely to notice. An officer checks on a recently raided stash house.



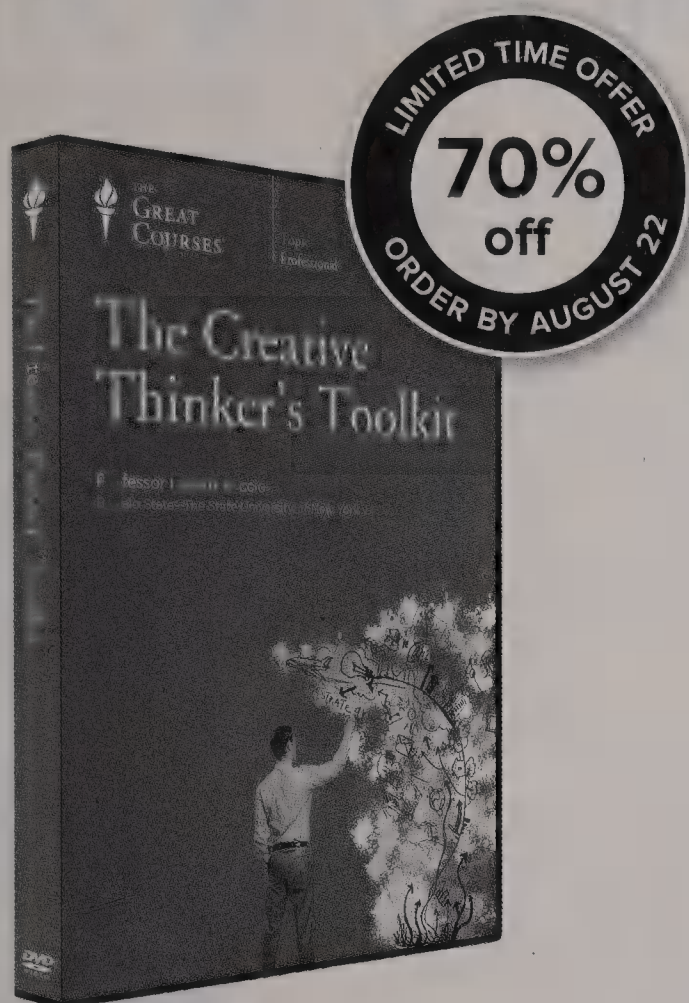


Neighbors watch a raid in San Juan, Texas. As the use of stash houses rises and the dangerous conditions are described by local media, residents have become more willing to tip off authorities. A stash house in San Juan, Texas, following a raid









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# A PORTRAIT OF THE A

Revisiting James Joyce's medi

One summer evening in 1917, James Joyce was walking down a street in Zurich when he developed a pain in his right eye so severe he couldn't move. A bystander helped him to a nearby bench, where he gazed at halos around the streetlights. After twenty minutes, he was able to pull himself onto a tram and make his way home. Joyce was suffering from glaucoma brought on by acute anterior uveitis, an inflammation of the iris, which had eroded his optic nerves. He'd had two previous "eye attacks," as he called them—the first in 1907—and now allowed a surgeon to cut away a small piece of his iris. Nora Barnacle, Joyce's partner, wrote to Ezra Pound that Joyce's eye was still bleeding painfully ten days on. Joyce's attacks recurred intermittently for the next twenty years, and in that time he had about a dozen eye surgeries. By the age of forty-eight, he was essentially blind. The origin of Joyce's decades-long battle with uveitis has never been definitively named. Before penicillin's introduction, in the 1940s, the most common cause was syphilis (uveitis is now most often associated with autoimmune disorders), and Joyce began visiting prostitutes at age fourteen. Was his affliction sexually transmitted?

In the absence of distinct evidence, very few scholars have been eager to raise the possibility that Joyce was syphilitic. Joyce's grandson Stephen, his patron Harriet Shaw Weaver, and Nora Barnacle all destroyed letters from him that they deemed too personal. Richard Ellmann, Joyce's preeminent biographer, examined extensive medical documents but never addressed syphilis, and the documents have since gone missing. It wasn't until 1975 that a biographer speculatively attributed Joyce's chronic uveitis to the disease. Five years later, Vernon Hall, a Ph.D. in comparative literature, and Burton Waisbren, a medical doctor, reread *Ulysses* and found syphilis everywhere—in Stephen Dedalus's "somewhat troubled" sight, in Leopold Bloom's verbal lapses, even in the "repetitive use of the letter s." In 1995, a Joyce scholar named Kathleen Ferris published a book arguing that Nora Barnacle had serious syphilitic complications, that Lucia, her daughter with Joyce, was suffering from neurosyphilitic insanity, and that Joyce himself eventually developed a form of advanced neurosyphilis called *tabes dorsalis*. Hall and Waisbren had *tabes* in mind when they noted the staggering Stephen and the stiff-legged Leopold. Ferris used it to explain Joyce's habit of walking around with an ashplant cane and suggested that the disease left him impotent and incontinent before giving him the intestinal ulcer that killed him, in 1941, at the age of fifty-eight.

Though Ferris was the first scholar to make a systematic case for syphilis, her diagnoses were overzealous (Joyce's cane, for instance, was merely an affectation), and her book garnered a largely negative reaction from the few Joyceans who took note of it. Primary among them was an Irish doctor named J. B. Lyons, who concluded, in an article for a neuroscience journal in 2000, that her argument was "preposterous." Yet Joyce's medical history, which I have pieced together from letters (many of them unpublished) and other documents, seemingly describes all the stages of syphilis. The disease begins with infection by a corkscrew-shaped bacterium called *Treponema pallidum* that gathers in lesions on the skin. Joyce may have contracted syphilis during one of his many visits to Dublin's red-light district in 1904. That same year he sought treatment for a persistent urethral discharge caused by gonorrhea. In 1907, Stanislaus Joyce wrote of rubbing his brother's body with a concoction of grappa and salt, possibly to disinfect lesions. Joyce was teaching English in Trieste, and he had come down with what he called "rheumatic fever," a popular diagnosis used at the time to describe a collection of ailments including ocular inflammation and stomach problems. These could also have been attributable to syphilis, which can resemble multiple nonvenereal conditions. One common symptom, periodontal disease, got so bad for Joyce that in 1923 he had seventeen teeth extracted. Once in the bloodstream, *Treponema* can infest virtually every tissue it encounters.





# ARTIST AS A SYPHILITIC

Record, by Kevin Birmingham



In Trieste, Joyce was bedridden for weeks, and his right arm became, according to his brother's diary, "disabled" for more than a month. What exactly Stanislaus meant remains a vexing question. If the joints in Joyce's right arm were merely stiff and inflamed, he may have had some innocuous form of arthritis, which is what Lyons argued in 2000. But if his arm was partially paralyzed, it's possible the *Treponema* spirochete was attacking Joyce's peripheral nervous system. Years later, Joyce complained of pain in his right shoulder, where the deltoid muscle was also badly atrophied. In 1928, this shoulder had what he called a "large boil," which in the advanced stages of syphilis can form as lesions cluster and merge. Lyons proposed that Joyce had an autoimmune affliction called Reiter syndrome, a form of reactive arthritis typically triggered by a gastrointestinal infection. But whereas Joyce's eye problems recurred over two decades, consistent with syphilis, a Reiter flare-up typically lasts only a few weeks, and its three chief symptoms are arthritis, urethritis, and conjunctivitis—not uveitis. One of the largest-ever Reiter studies, of an outbreak among Finnish soldiers at an army hospital on the Russian front in 1943, found that more than two thirds of the 344 patients suffered from conjunctivitis. Only eleven had uveitis. Reiter syndrome, moreover, nearly always affects the lower limbs, and even then it is unlikely to "disable" anything. If Joyce had Reiter syndrome, he had a particularly rare form of an illness that in his day afflicted perhaps three in 100,000 people. Syphilis struck one in ten.

The key to Joyce's medical mystery is not his symptoms, however. It's his treatment. A syphilis diagnosis prior to World War II meant taking tolerable doses of poison. Mercury pills and ointments, which had been popular for centuries, weakened patients until their teeth, fingernails, and hair began falling out. By the early 1900s, doctors had started experimenting with arsenic compounds, which were harsh and only partially effective. The most popular of these, Salvarsan, killed hundreds of patients before the introduction of a less potent version. In October 1928, distraught and nearly blind, Joyce wrote in two letters that he was on a three-week regimen of "injections of arsenic and phosphorus." He was surely describing a compound—doctors would not have injected either substance alone. What decades of Joyce biographers have overlooked is that the chemical compound of arsenic and phosphorus is a little-known syphilis medication called galyl (phospharsenamine). While less commonly prescribed than Salvarsan, galyl had one important advantage: unlike the earlier drug, there was no risk that it would harm Joyce's already damaged optic nerve. Crucially, galyl was the only injectable compound of arsenic and phosphorus, and the only reason a doctor would have injected a patient with it was if that patient had syphilis.

The advanced stages of syphilis sometimes lead to a syndrome of abrupt psychoses, erratic personality transformations, memory loss, and delusions of grandeur—in Joyce's time it was called "general paralysis of the insane." While syphilis probably contributed to Joyce's "nervous collapses" and crying fits, he was spared the disease's most debilitating neurological problems. He did experience delirium and hallucinations—in 1924 he wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver that his room in Paris was haunted by the sounds of tumbling books—but these were likely caused by medications he took for his many other ailments. The bookseller Sylvia Beach remembered visiting Joyce in an eye clinic after surgery and watching helplessly as he raved for hours. By the 1930s, he was taking six sleeping pills a night. Decades after his death, scholars often remember Joyce as a hypersensitive artist, a grouching hypochondriac with easily frayed nerves, but his pain went much deeper than we have realized. To the mountains of data scholars have gathered about his life—down to the songs he sang and the marginalia scrawled in his books—we can now add the revelation that Joyce suffered intensely and for most of his life from syphilis, even as he was writing some of the twentieth century's most brilliant prose. ■

Kevin Birmingham's *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's "Ulysses"* was published last month by Penguin Press.



# TO THE CORNER

By Jess Walter

**S**weet September up in the Boone—twenty past last bell on the first day of school and a pumpkin-colored school bus tools down Boone Street laying middle schoolers along the porch-couch weed-lot crapboard houses of West Central: the Twilight Zone, Felony Flats, the West Centy. At the second-to-last stop KJ and crew come off the bus slinging backpacks as they head straight to the corner—spot they haunted all summer—barely out the sighing bus doors when shirts come off, ribs, guts, pecs, clavicles jutting beneath beige-black-white casings, *All the above*, as Studio says—boys hitting the chain-link kitty-corner from the Family Suprette, where they sag-scrape-low-hang-lean, all of them eyeing the only girl gets off at their stop, name they can't remember, inky-haired lovely seventh-grade Rah-something—who won't even look their way—until KJ sighs a single word: *Damn*.

Mmm.

S'right.

Then Rah-something turns the corner and four heads swing the other way in sync, like birds on a clothesline—KJ saying, *Doug B, why your backpack look like My Little Ponies*—Doug B's lame comeback, *You should see my dick*, which might be funny except he always comes back about his dick, so Studio is ready

Jess Walter's story "Thief" appeared in the March 2012 issue of Harper's Magazine. He lives with his family in Spokane.

with, *Your dick? Thought that was a belly button*.

Nah. All chill up in the Boone.

Summer still, says A-Sym—so called because of his one droopy eye, scar, crooked smile.

*Should cancel school when the bump hit eighty*.

*That's some sensible shit*.

Cars go by—sleds and rides, buckets, trucks and bikes, minivans of parents picking up kids from Holmes, grade school where this crew met—these *Holmes homes* narrating traffic like they did all summer: *I'd drive that and Imagine if your moms look like her and Put some wheels on that sled, yo and Why all Priuses look so constipated?* Nah man, all chill up here in the Boone.

Across the street, old gray brocade curtains part and a head eases out, like an elephant being born: a silver-haired white man squinting over bifocals, watching the boys on the corner, grimy storm-glass window making it seem like he's mouthed the words *Well, I'll be goddamned*.

On the other side of glass and curtains: a dark living room, midcentury American (first time around), and tall, craggy Leonard Darvin pulls away from the window, repeating to himself for emphasis, breaking off each word. *I. Will. Be. God. Damned*. He thought for sure that when school started those kids would leave that corner, but no, here they are again. *Are you kid-*

*ding me?* Leonard rants among relics—bookshelves bloated with dusty hard-covers, a blue sectional, two clamshell club chairs, console TV, hi-fi. All summer he watched those wastrels gather on that corner and loiter, their very existence an affront to the careful steps of his own life: Korea, G.I. Bill, junior college, marriage and kids, Squires circle counselor in the Knights of Columbus, copydesk at the afternoon newspaper, then city-desk reporter when the morning paper ate the afternoon, then back to the copydesk, and before he knew it, a buyout retirement and part-time job as a reference librarian, full retirement and full grandparenthood, all of it an easy glide until last year. There's nothing in life he likes less than self-pity and yet he can't seem to stop: a *what-was-it-all-about* refrain plays in his head. When Marjorie died he stopped going to mass, stopped fishing, stopped opening curtains, stopped doing everything he loved except the garden. And even that he gave up this summer. Maybe that's what he hates about those boys on the corner, that they've somehow skipped to an ending they haven't earned. That they seem born with the knowledge he's only now discovered, that it's rigged, for nothing, that we're all just standing on corners, waiting for dirt—

No, Leonard says aloud. *Bullshit*. He can't recall a single moment that he spent with the lack of initiative those



boys across the street show every day, just ... *standing there*. But it's not the laziness that gets him, or that they'll sometimes mess with traffic, or that they might be drug dealers or their single mothers might get food stamps, if Michael is correct, or any of that right-wing, phony, up-by-his-bootstraps bullshit that Leonard's eldest spouts (*Don't forget who paid for those bootstraps, Michael*). Leonard is not the sort of jackass who sees kids on a corner and worries about neighborhood property values the way his daughters do. (Oh, he sees the girls

cars parked in front of his house, neighbors going the rental route with single-coat-paint remodels—through it all, Leonard held tight. For fifty years, he engaged the neighborhood kids, shot baskets with them, asked after their families and homework, hired them to rake leaves or help with his big garden. Last spring, he even tried hiring one of those corner kids, Timothy, but the boy just stopped showing up, disappeared off the corner (*Probably in juvie*, Michael said), and that's when Leonard was done with them, done with all of it, done trying,

the harshest reaction came from Michael, whose every solution comes from talk radio, who squinted out the window and said, *At least two of them look white*, as if that had something to do with it. One day Michael showed up with a small black box with two chrome latches and said, *Look what I got for you, Dad*, opening it slowly, *for your protection*, like some sacred relic.

*Christ, Michael.*

*It's just a .22. In case those gangbangers give you trouble.*

**B**ack when he was a reporter Leonard covered a house fire in this neighborhood, in what, '70, '71? Woman fell asleep with a lit cigarette and *Foom!*, up went her house. Leonard was finishing a night cop shift and caught it on the scanner, roused a lazy shooter and they met at the scene, fire crew pushed back by the heat, Leonard's photog snapping away, flames framing the back of this stone-faced woman with a blanket wrapped around her. That's when, from this raging house fire, a little kid walked out, four years old, just strolled right out of the inferno and up the sidewalk in scorched pajamas and smoking hair, easy as if he was coming to catch the school bus, and a firefighter scooped the kid and only then did the mother begin to howl and weep, two other kids dead as coal, but her four-year-old walking out calm as Jesus, and nobody had seen anything like it, a miracle for sure, but at mass that Sunday, Leonard had to fight to keep his praying mind from asking, *If You could do that, why not have all three kids walk out?*—*wrong wrong wrong*, he scolded himself, but too late, like a first crack in a foundation. Every night for a month after that he stood over his kids' beds and prayed for their safety, and vowed to love them so much it would hurt, and he did, and it did, and he's proud of them, and quietly proud of himself for putting four through college into good, decent lives (two teachers, a radiology tech, and Michael in sales), and he'd have put the fifth through college too, if not for that druggie boyfriend, and yes, he loves his kids and he loves his kids' kids and if he's around that long he will love his kids'



calculating their small inheritance.) No, it's the sheer waste of time, of health, of potential. That's what offends him. Grim determination has kept Leonard living in West Central for fifty years, through boom and bust, and bust and bust and bust, rumors of gentrification becoming stale jokes, his brothers in Seattle and Portland tripling their money while his home's value remained as flat as the land it sat on. He was resolute through regular bouts of vandalism and theft, junk

done caring. For the first time his depressed neighborhood depresses him: those saggy-pants shirtless boys, that corner.

*Don't go looking for trouble*, his daughter Emily said during one of his rants about the kids on the corner. *If they're harassing you, call the cops*. Middle daughter Sandra, who yells as if her father lived at the end of a wind tunnel, saw it as an opportunity to move things along, *Dad, maybe it's time to think about assisted living!* But



kids' kids—but really, his son's solution to some shirtless, saggy-pants teenage boys hanging across the street is to bring him a gun?

No, he loves his children as much as on those nights he stood praying above their beds, but sometimes he suspects they might be the ripest assholes in the whole wide world.

Leonard slides into the bedroom, where he's finished boxing up Marjorie's clothes. A year, that's what everyone advised. So he waited. A year next week. Michael and his wife want to have everyone over for dinner, to what, commemorate. What he'd give to miss that dinner. Leonard has written *MARJORIE* on the boxes of clothes, as if they could belong to someone else. The girls picked over most of her things during the past year, magpies. The rest of her stuff takes up just four boxes, one less than he bought. Perhaps he should fill the extra box with his own clothes, which hang in the closet, work shirts and Sansabelt slacks, twill pants and Sunday jackets, hats, belts, ties.

On the stand next to Marjorie's side of the bed are pictures of the grandkids and a frame with a small stained-glass Jesus: *DIVINE MERCY*, it says on the bottom. Sunlight used to glow in little Jesus' robes in the mornings. Marjorie seemed to sense something in Leonard after the miracle of the house fire—of course she did—quitting the Knights of Columbus, quoting Graham Greene (*the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God*). *You need to trust your faith*, Marjorie used to say. *But what if you were my faith?* Where does that irrational anger come from: that she left him, that it was indecent, even cruel of her to go first? He can't imagine driving those boxes to Goodwill. *MARJORIE*, the boxes say, and he will leave his Marjorie among the used clothes and couches and he will drive to dinner at Michael's, all those children and grandchildren, strangers really, watching him. And then he'll begin a second year without her. Christ God.

On a shelf in the half-empty closet, above his clothes, sits Michael's shiny black gun box; the latches gleam at him like unblinking eyes. He feels like his kids are trying to tell him something he isn't hearing, something drastic: *Those gangbangers . . . looking for trouble . . . maybe it's time*. The latches

of the gun box glitter in agreement. He covered such things as a reporter, of course; he has seen the spatter. In the mouth is the best way to do it.

Out on the corner the boys pool their money and send Doug B to the Suprette for Skittles and Red Bulls. Traffic from the elementary school dying now, cars dwindling until eventually a lone Subaru turns onto Boone and boredom pulls KJ off the fence. He rubs his ass above his pants and pimp-limps into Boone Street, almost to the divided yellow—so the short-haired lady in her sporty wagon got to go around, all the way into the other lane, the three on the fence hooting her along, *Go on 'round now, sister and Don't be late meeting your girl up at the REI*.

Subaru Lady throws a harsh sideways at KJ—*Damn*, he says—but she goes on around because what's she gonna do, stop and yell at some rocked-out kid in the street, line of white-drawered ass above his jeans? Nah, cars never stop, might sometimes honk, but never stop, always go on 'round, drivers quickly doing the math—jacked by some rangy-looking brown kid—stupid experiment in profiling that KJ runs over and over as if looking to disprove the only thing he knows for sure.

*You gonna get run over one of these times*, Doug B says.

*Yeah, man, why you always do that?* asks A-Sym.

Studio knows why KJ does his stupid-ass street stroll, same reason he crosses Boone wherever and whenever he wants, but Studio would never say it aloud, go all school-counselor bullshit on them—this being the one thing Kelvin James can control, not his shit-bird stepdad or his lazy mom or the Russian dudes who always want to fight him or the substation cop who has convinced herself that KJ is some kind of banger, middle-school kingpin (*You slinging today, chief?*)—nah, just this fence, this crew, this corner.

The fourth kid, little Doug B, several pounds of wit and wisdom below the other three, makes no such mental observations, just watches KJ and thinks, *Dude, how you get your chest*

*like that?* Doug B all crazy in love with KJ, and maybe that makes him gay but who knows, who really cares with Doug B. *Dude might just be too boring to be gay*, Studio said, which is why they tagged him Doug B, a name that upset him greatly (*My last name's Weller and anyway, what other Doug you know?*). But right now Doug B could care less about his lame tag or whether the others think he's gay or boring or both—his only concern is how it is he can do fifty push-ups a day, just like KJ advised, and still have a chest like a Boone Street pothole.

Seriously, Doug B says, *how you do your chest like that, K? You finally break down and buy that P90?*

KJ shakes his head. *It's called P90X, Doug. And nah man, I ain't bought that shit, I just watch the commercials. It's common sense. Go after different muscle groups, triangulate 'em, keep 'em guessing. That's all P90X is.*

Studio has a thought: *Hey—you think P90X its Muslim name?*

It was the book Studio chose from the honors English summer reading list, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; he gave it to KJ to read and KJ passed it on to A-Sym.

*Yeah, KJ says, maybe it was P90 Little till it put on a bow tie and join the Nation.*

*P90 Brian my slave name, bitch. I'm P90X now.*

Laughter breaks and rolls like a wave coming ashore. Even Doug B is laughing—although the others suspect, correctly, that he doesn't get it.

*P90 Brian, A-Sym repeats, through snorts.*

*Yeah, says Doug B—*

Then something catches their eyes up the street. KJ squints. *That Blight?* And sure enough, riding up on a new mountain bike, skidding sideways to a stop, all braces and big grin, it's Blight.

*No way! Look who up in the Boone today!*

*Blight! Where you been, man?*

*You steal that bike, Blight?*

*Nah, I found it in the folds of your girlfriend's ass.*

When Timothy first crashed the Boone, KJ called him Red Hedge, then Whack—tall, skinny red-fro'd beige-and-bones living up in that lady-wasn't-



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even-his-mom's crap-nasty-smelling house—and KJ and the boys would be scrapin' and Timothy would walk by on his way to the Suprette for some cereal for the little random kids in that smelly house and they would tease him, *Where you goin', Red Hedge? Or What up, Whack?*—Timothy smiling right off at the nicknames. Then Studio had him last fall in seventh-grade honors math at Glover Middle and he told KJ, *Man, that dude is fun-NEE*, only kind of intelligence that matters on the corner, and one day in the winter Timothy stopped at the fence and suggested they change his tag from Whack (white/black) to Blight (black/white). And like that, Blight was in.

But then there was a shit show at his house, right at the end of school, cops coming in after Blight got knocked around by the-dude-crashing-with-the-lady-ain't-even-Blight's-mother, prompting KJ to say what they all knew, *Man, we all ghetto, but that shit Blight livin' in? That's just wrong.*

After the cops came Child Protective Services—the butterflies, KJ calls them, master of free association that he is (social workers/social butterflies/butterflies). He's had his own experience with the butterflies, couple of reports, two home visits, one short stretch of foster care. But even the butterflies recognize real shit when they see it, and they yanked Blight out of that house and threw him in with fosters. Now here he is three months later and Timothy looks great—real haircut, tight reddish curls just coming in, taller and thicker, arms and chest filling out. Court-ordered, Medicaid-paid, rubber-banded orthodontic grill.

Blight, Doug B says, *man, you all tall and shit.*

And A-Sym: *How you like it up in the Sac?*

It became their thing this summer, saying *up in the*—mostly to fuck with the substation cop, who likes it when they talk like characters from *The Wire*—*Hey, po-po! We be up in the Boone las' night and we seen some raw shit go down, yo*—the others trying to keep a straight face as KJ goes full street on the suggestible substation cop—*Yo, that Russian crew hang at Broadway Foods, they all up in the rock now, slingin' that shit.*

This *up-in-the* thing, it's so crazy catchy they can't help themselves,

and now everything is *up in the*—all of them *up in the Boone*, Studio *up in the honors*, A-Sym *up in the dojo* where his uncle takes him for karate, Doug B *up in the special ed* (Doug B: *I ain't in special ed, I work with a learning specialist is all*), KJ trying to get *up in the pussy* with that freshman girl lives over on Sinto.

And Blight? *He all up in the Sac now*, and he hears it right away, likes the sound of it, knows intuitively they will say *up in the* until they all know to say something else. As for Sacajawea Middle School, on South Hill, where his foster parents live, he's not sure what to say. He shrugs. *Nah, it's good. I mean, it's fine.*

*What about the girls? I hear they smokin'.*

*They all right. You know, I already had most of 'em. And half the moms. Working my way through the teachers now.*

They come off the fence again, Blight's lips parting over his braces of that juggy rim of his.

*You kill me, Blight.*

*You got to hook us up, man, get us all up in that South Hill ass.*

Not me, Studio says. *Them Sac girls so stuck up you need a Sherpa to talk to 'em.*

Blight and KJ bust up again, A-Sym and Doug B, too, although they don't know what a Sherpa is.

Sherpa, Doug B says.

*So how them fosters treatin' you, Blight?*

*Nah, like I said, it's good, man.*

*You look like you eatin'.*

*The lady, she love that food channel, always trying shit out. Hummus and capers and shit.*

*The fuck's a caper? Like a crime?*

*Nah, it's just, like, a little olive. But without a hole.*

*So rich people get the whole olive and in the hood we get the shit with holes?*

Blight laughs. *Nah man, a caper's tiny, like a BB. And my foster parents ain't rich.*

*How many in the house?*

Six. All boys. *They all pretty cool. The lady can't have kids so they started takin' 'em in. Nah, I miss this, you know, but it's okay. And it is okay—the oldest boy might be a creeper, always getting too close to him, but the kid might just be lonesome too, Timothy can't tell. Anyway, it's calm: none of the edge he felt living down here.*

And yet, at the same time, he misses ... what? Something? Everything?

KJ nods. He knows what that is, missing shit you shouldn't. Did a month with the fosters when his stepdad beat on his mom two years ago. It's a pleasant suck, but it ain't home. *I feel ya, B.*

Much as they missed Blight over the summer, they were all glad he got out. Kid got a shit deal: real mom sketches off with some Air Force dude when Blight's little, real dad moves in with that pale lady-wasn't-even-his-mother, then the dad goes on a bug-eyed tweak, ends up in jail for stealing air-conditioning units for the copper, leaving Blight in a house with no blood, stuck babysitting random kids, Rebecca's three-by-three—three kids by three dads, plus Blight. In fact, that's what Blight's doing back here. With school starting he was thinking about the oldest boy after him, Bowen. So he rode his bike past the house for the first time since June, hoping to catch those kids-ain't-his-siblings walking home from school, but the curtains were closed on the house and Timothy isn't supposed to stop—not that the lady-ain't-his-mom, Rebecca, is so terrible—he liked her most of the time, until she'd get depressed, then the curtains would stay closed and the house would go to shit and he'd end up getting the kids ready for school himself, making all the meals while she bugged off on oxy or crystal or booze, whatever the new guy was using—and a few times she even made Timothy ... what would you call it, cuddle? Is that even the right word? That's what freaked the social workers out the most, even though Timothy told them it was okay, she didn't want sex or nothing (to his shame, he kind of did), just someone to hang onto, and he didn't blame her for it—she's only ten years older than him—but he wishes he could've taken Rebecca's kids with him when he left, especially Bowen, who's eight and who was handed the baton in the shit relay when Timothy left, stuck taking care of the others (*But that's just your guilt talking*, his counselor said, what she calls Timothy's *got-out guilt*).

That's who Blight hopes to see today—Bowen and the other two randoms—his little white-boy/black-boy/white-girl ain't-his-brothers-and-sister.



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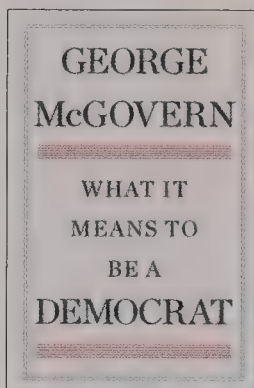
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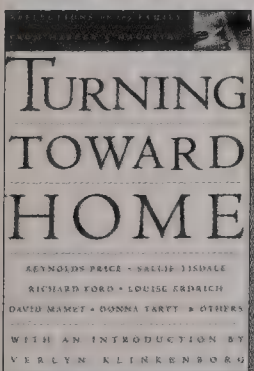


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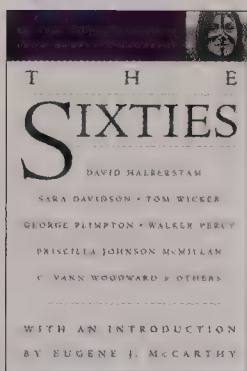


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You all seen Bowen around today? Blight asks.

Nah, man. KJ turns to the others. Any of you see little man walk home from school today?

I seen him a few days ago over at Broadway Foods, Doug B offers. Seemed good.

Timothy pictures Bowen digging in cushions for quarters to buy the large mac-and-cheese, just like he used to do.

He must've already gone past, Blight, Studio says. Sorry, man.

Timothy nods. Studio is the guy he really misses, dude even smarter than Timothy, or quicker anyway, a genius if he had to guess. He thinks about a phrase he read once, *native intelligence*—Studio's dad being a quarter Kalispel or something, though not enough to register Studio or get that casino money. Anyway, he doesn't think that's what native intelligence is supposed to mean. While Blight likes all the guys—A-Sym with his good-natured, crazy-ass crooked face; big scary-sweet time-bomb KJ; even dull Doug B—Studio is the guy Timothy wishes could come to Sac to take the honors classes with him, like they did at Glover.

Hang here, KJ says, *maybe the lady-ain't-your-mom will send Bow to the store again.*

Blight feels for the phone in his pocket—he should really check in with his foster mom, but he doesn't want them to see he's got his own phone, seems shitty somehow—Nah, I should get going.

Why'n't you just go on up to the house? Doug B asks.

Dude, KJ says—Doug B so stupid sometimes—and it all gets heavy on the corner for a minute.

Blight shrugs. *I can't have no contact with Rebecca unless I'm with my guardian ad litem.*

Even heavier now, the other guys wondering what exactly went on with that lady—it's quiet, but the others can tell when Studio is building to something.

Be a good stage name, he says finally, *Guardian Ad Litem. Court-appointed rapper.*

Laughter peals again.

Rollin' in my Toyota Tercel/makin' sure them kids be well.

KJ doubles over again and Blight covers his braced teeth—laughing so hard as Studio goes off—*Yo bad moms, check your frustration/I'm just here to watch visitation*—and oh man, they're laughing, so easy up in the Boone, sweet, sweet September, seventy-seven still on the bump on the first day of school, 2006—and damn if this ain't the best place, no other place and time—

—and that's when they catch movement across the street—that buggy old guy, Leonard, whose wife died last year, old gray stork Leonard coming out his front door, carrying something. They all look up, and Timothy smiles at him. He did yard work for Leonard last spring, nice old guy always brought him sandwiches and Dr Peppers while he weeded, which is how Timothy first got a taste for Dr Pepper, working in old Leonard's garden. But something's off, something is wrong. Leonard doesn't seem to recognize him now.

Gentlemen, Leonard says, his gray hair crazy-wire as he strolls across the street with a box, *I have something for you—*

The old man angles across the street and sets the box on the curb. He smiles at them, little tufts of white hair coming out his ears, big bug-eye glasses, question-mark spine.

And here they are, six of the 9,000 people who live up in the Boone, in Felony Flats, Misdemeanor Meadow, West Central, the West Centy, on a natural peninsula carved by the curling Spokane River, which makes a loose U around the neighborhood and frames it to the south, to the west, to the north, while on the east, Monroe Street's cop shop, courthouse, and jail form a rough gate, so it's the one neighborhood you can't escape—and if you believe the cops and real estate agents, this might be the worst strip in the city, maybe in the whole state—but you know what, fuck 'em, it's also the most alive when it's warm like this, everybody on the street, all that bagged-beer chronic drama playing out on porches and sidewalks, outdoor couches and striped lawn chairs, in weedy lots and parks and out front of Vietnamese grocers, on corners like this one—

—where a lonesome old widower reaches down in the cardboard box he brought out of his house and five boys lean forward a little—

—to see the old man come up with a handful of belts.

*I have gifts!*

He holds out belts like a preacher at one of those snake churches, a nest of black and brown. *All summer I watched you gentlemen struggle with your trousers and I thought, What kind of country is this, where smart young men can't even afford belts? We can send satellites into space, shrink a computer to the size of a billfold, but we can't keep a young fella's pants up?*

His grin is playful, almost like theirs, as he holds out an old-man belt for each of them. *No man should have to go around with his underwear out for the world to see.*

The boys cock their heads in a *dude's-fuckin'-with-us* way, Doug B tugging at his khakis.

And look, I brought shirts too! Leonard kicks over the box and they spill out: shirts! Stripes and whites and patterns and that baby blue of fat guys in cubicles: must be ten old-guy dress shirts in here.

No one should go without a shirt in America, Leonard says. *There are two things you need to know to make your way in this world. Education is the great equalizer. And clothes make the man.* He reaches down and grabs a shirt with a pattern that looks like old wallpaper. He holds the snake's nest of belts and this shirt out for the biggest kid, clearly the leader.

And sure enough, KJ comes fast off the fence, chooses a belt carefully, woven brown leather. He pulls his jeans up over his white undershorts, tugs the belt through the loops. He takes a shirt too, the most ridiculous one, a swirly curly pattern, big-ass Seventies collar, and puts it on. It strains his chest and arms, but he manages to button it all the way to the top. *I should tuck this shit in, huh?* And he tucks it and yanks his pants up over his hips to his navel, cinches that brown leather belt around the rumpled waistband of the pants, and turns to his crew. They're laughing their asses off, KJ looking like a substitute teacher, and now they're all grabbing for belts and hoisting pants



and tucking shirts and maybe tomorrow, Studio thinks, when they dress like this at school, this will catch on, and within weeks it will seep up to the high schools and onto the Web and onto streets everywhere, or maybe they're already doing it in Queens or Compton or Quebec and in a month every kid will know that *this is now cool*, cinching and tucking and buttoning—old-man style—Urban Outfitters and American Apparel picking up on it just as the substation cop sends out a memo that *this gang is now wearing Sansabelt slacks and that gang crushed fedoras*, but that's all in the future because for now it's still a sweet September day on a slow corner up in the Boone—

—where a laughing KJ and crew have followed Leonard across the street and into his house, front door wide open, A-Sym pulling curtains—*Let a little light in, old dude*—sun busting on dusty wall-to-wall, and into the bedroom, where Leonard has taken all his clothes out of the closet and spread them out on the bed, KJ and crew chugging Dr Peppers and going through Leonard's whole wardrobe, *Check it out and Look at this—Take it all*, Leonard saying, *anything you want*, cabbie hats and loafers, the old man standing in the doorway smiling, but wistful, and that's when Blight breaks off from the pile of clothes and sidles up to the old man: *Do you even remember me, Leonard?*

He looks over at the boy, and maybe he was thrown by his height—but yes, the light-brown skin, the big eyes, the reddish fro (but tighter now, the kid so much taller)—can this be the young man he had work in his garden last spring? He gave that kid books and cans of soda, and they talked about school. He was in honors classes, English and U.S. history and algebra, and Leonard told him to suck as much out of that school as the cheap bastards would give, and yeah, yeah, it IS him—*Timothy?* Leonard asks—kid's grin going off with a flash of new braces, and it IS him, here, now, looking not just older but like he's crossed over into some other territory, it IS him, and Leonard realizes that he was hurt by the kid disap-

pearing like that, hurt by everyone good leaving at once. By God, Timothy! How are you?

Good. I got moved into foster care. I'm up at Sac now.

Ah, that's a good school. You going on to Ferris or LC?

Ferris prolly.

Takin' honors classes still. College-prep stuff?

Yes, sir.

That's good. Outstanding. Keep that up. Out of the gardening business, though?

Timothy shrugs.

And before he really considers what he's saying, that it commits him to tomorrow and after, Leonard offers something he hadn't planned: *I could still use someone to clear the beds. Rake leaves. Trim the hedges.*

*I could come on Saturdays if you want.*

A stone in his throat. Goddamn. Leonard had a whole farewell speech planned for these corner wastrels, commencement address, goodbye, benediction, about how it's short, life, how you're young and you know everything, but really you don't know shit until you're too old to do anything about the shit you finally know, and just when you get comfortable it bleeds away from you, all that you worked for, THAT'S why you can't waste a day of it, *not a single god-damned day, gentlemen*—because one day, before you know it: *Foom!*

*Is it okay if I bring my little brother?* Timothy asks. He imagines having Bowen meet him here on Saturdays, letting him have the money they make, good way to start easing Bow out of that house.

Leonard is staring at the shiny black gun box in the closet. *Hmm?* he says to Timothy; did the kid say something about having a brother come? Oh, of course, yes, he says, *bring anyone you want.*

KJ and crew are completely decked out now, crisp and buttoned, caps jaunty, belts tight. But Timothy is looking past them, to one of the boxes marked MARJORIE. Leonard's eyes follow: a little glass Jesus sits on top of the clothes in the box. Christ God, the appalling mercy. The corner boys laugh and model for each other as Timothy helps Leonard hang the rest of his clothes back up in the closet. ■

Jean Baréma

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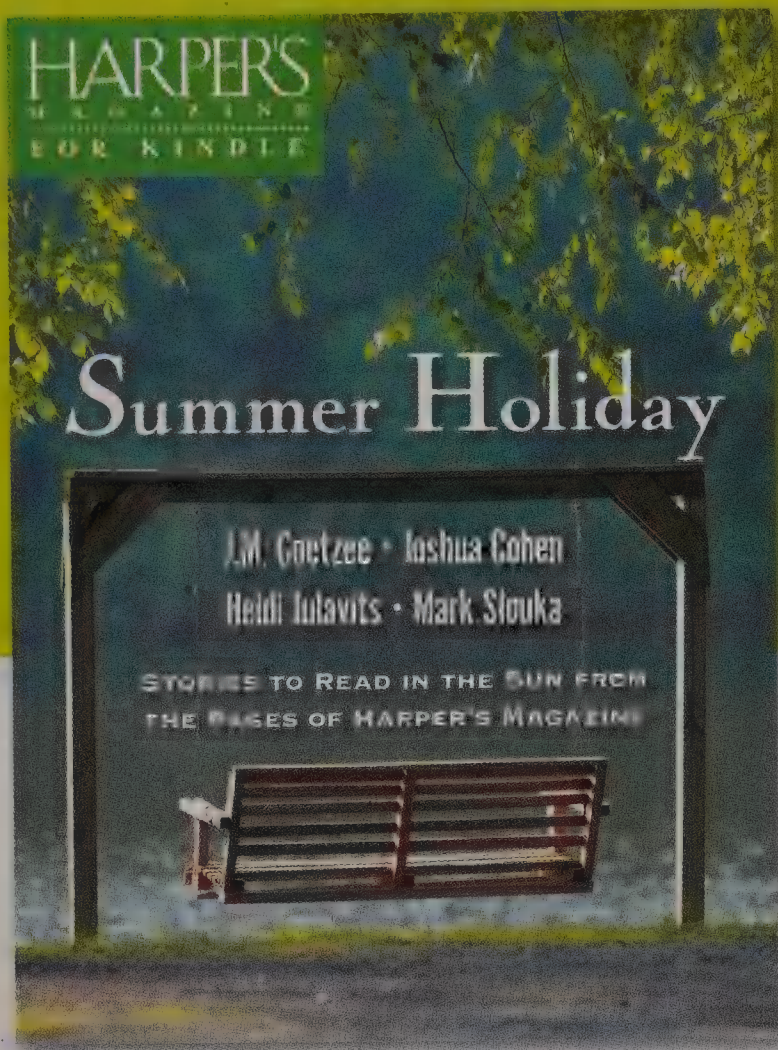
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# NEW BOOKS

By Christine Smallwood



When five brightly balaclava'd members of the Pussy Riot collective climbed atop the altar of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior in February 2012 to chant "Our Lady, Chase Putin Out!," they became celebrities; five months later, when Yekaterina Samutsevich, Maria Alyokhina, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova answered the state's charge of hooliganism, they became heroes. Their closing statements turned a show trial into *The Death of Socrates*. Samutsevich criticized the government's exploitation of Orthodox symbols, Alyokhina lamented political

apathy, and Tolokonnikova insisted that their action, which was sending them to prison, had really set them free. Accused of religious hatred, she offered spiritual wisdom. "A human being is a creature that is always in error, never perfect," she said. "She quests for wisdom, but cannot possess it. I think that Christianity ... supports the search for truth and a constant overcoming of oneself, the overcoming of what you were earlier."

"Constant overcoming of oneself" is a somewhat less media-ready maxim than Solzhenitsyn's "Words will break cement," which became a slogan for the

group's plight. (Tolokonnikova quoted it in her statement, and the journalist Masha Gessen used it as the title of a book.) But "constant overcoming" captures something at least as profound about the meaning of Pussy Riot's "punk prayer": a spirit of remaking, a seeking after truth that gladly risks ridicule and indignity, a rejection of pharisaical expertise. The Puritans used the term "visible saint" to describe the elect among them—those who had a message but, being human, no authority to speak it. Tolokonnikova, for what it's worth, puts her faith in miracles. "I love miracles and strive for them. All of our activity is a quest for miracles."

So she wrote in 2012 from Penal Colony No. 14 (PC-14) in Partsa, Mordovia, where she was held for nearly two years, until the eve of the Sochi Olympics. Her letter was addressed to the theorist-provocateur Slavoj Žižek, in a correspondence arranged by the French philosopher Michel Eltchaninoff. The exchange has now been published as **COMRADELY GREETINGS: THE PRISON LETTERS OF NADYA AND SLAVOJ** (Verso, \$9.95, [versobooks.com](http://versobooks.com)). It's a short volume—eleven letters, two of which date after Tolokonnikova's release, as events in Crimea tilted toward annexation.

The conditions at PC-14 are notoriously inhumane. The inmates are beaten, denied sleep, fed rotten food, and forced to bathe from faucets that regularly burst with sewage. Bribes are routinely extorted. And prison, like Pussy Riot, has collective politics: when one person speaks out, everyone is punished. At first all this seems to Tolokonnikova



like another opportunity for self-overcoming. "I'm fascinated to see how



I'll cope with all this," she writes, bravely and heartbreakingly, in April 2013. Five months later she goes on a hunger strike.

Eltchaninoff's introduction insists that "Nadya Tolokonnikova is not only a punk protestor, but a great intellectual" with "perfect mastery of the reference points of contemporary thought." (Something may be out of joint with the critical climate when "reference points" are that which perfection demands.) His embarrassment at the contrast between a great male mind and a suffering female body is well-intentioned as far as it goes, but there is more to be gained from acknowledging difference than obscuring it. *Comradely Greetings* is a conversation between two different kinds of intellectual-activists with two different kinds of authority. Žižek proves that he respects Tolokonnikova by disagreeing with her, and at length: he rejects her description of Pussy Riot's performance as Dionysian excess and explains (entertainingly!) Hegelian totality; Tolokonnikova challenges Western Marxists with the facts of life in a "Special Economic Zone." Žižek's letters are easily twice as long as hers, though of course he wasn't writing them between sixteen-hour shifts at a broken-down sewing machine.

Tolokonnikova's last letter explains that, since their release, she and Alyokhina have been working to create protest-training programs inside prisons, beginning with women's camps. (Samutsevich was released in October 2012; none of the three are any longer members of Pussy Riot.) She remains loyal to her belief in revelatory, revolutionary speech, and seems unpersuaded by Žižek's argument that "Masters" are necessary to liberate the masses. "Female prisoners are the ones most totally deprived of voice," she writes. "Why is this so? Probably because women have long had inculcated into them a deep sense of weakness, of their need for a big, strong man ... Our work is already turning up evidence that a lot of them buy into this garbage."

**T**he American anointing of Pussy Riot as victims of censorship and exemplars of free speech is one way to avoid admitting that what lies in their crosshairs is not just Rus-

sian oligarchy but also global capitalism. Peter Finn and Petra Couvée's **THE ZHIVAGO AFFAIR: THE KREMLIN, THE CIA, AND THE BATTLE OVER A FORBIDDEN BOOK** (Pantheon, \$26.95, pantheonbooks.com) tells the history of a Russian dissident more palatable to U.S. interests—Boris Pasternak. Finn is national-security editor at the *Washington Post* and a former Moscow bureau chief; Couvée is a writer, translator, and professor at St. Petersburg University who uncovered the role of Dutch intelligence in the publication of Pasternak's novel. *The Zhivago Affair* contains the CIA's first public acknowledgment of its role, though rumors have circulated to this effect for years.

Beloved as a poet, Pasternak was spared arrest and worse in the purges of the 1930s, even after he drew attention to himself by refusing to sign a state petition. He had strange, prophetic conversations with both Trotsky and Stalin, and somehow beguiled the latter, who regarded him with mystical awe. In late 1945 Pasternak began writing a novel and attracted suspicion during a new wave of crackdowns—the Union of Soviet Writers passed a resolution stating that the author was "lacking in ideology and remote from Soviet reality." Maybe. *Dr. Zhivago* was a piece of historical fiction and made no concessions to the standards of socialist realism, but it was hardly critical of the revolution. (Not true of the David Lean film adaptation, which drips with aristocratic nostalgia.) Khrushchev admitted as much when he got around to reading it, in retirement. "We shouldn't have banned it," he said. "There's nothing anti-Soviet in it."

Pasternak knew better than to expect to publish *Dr. Zhivago*. But in 1956 a literary scout named Sergio D'Angelo visited him and obtained a copy for Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, an influential left-wing publisher from Milan. American interest was piqued: it was the era of the covert funding of *The Paris Review*, Radio Free Europe, and the Free Europe Press. The CIA was winding down its program of dropping propaganda from balloons over Eastern Europe and getting into mailing books through chinks in the Iron Curtain. (Later the books were given directly to tourists or traveling musicians.) With-

in fifteen years, more than a million volumes, including many miniature editions, were distributed to Soviet readers; the agency arranged for the translation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Pnin*, and *Animal Farm*, among others. The aim, in the words of a planning memo, was to "demonstrate the superior achievements of the West." The CIA's chief of covert action believed that books were "the most important weapon of strategic (long-range) propaganda," a notion that Finn and Couvée compare to Maxim Gorky's remarks at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934: "Books are the most important and most powerful weapons in socialist culture."

The case of *Dr. Zhivago* is dotted with close calls and copyright confusion. The University of Michigan Press almost scooped the CIA with their own edition, but operatives persuaded editors they would be putting Pasternak in danger. The book was printed in The Hague so that Dutch paper stock would "prove" that the United States hadn't been involved. (Moscow wasn't fooled.) Hundreds of copies were distributed through the Vatican pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair—illegally, as no one had ever obtained the rights from Feltrinelli—and that October Pasternak received a unanimous vote from the Swedish Academy for the Nobel Prize. (The official citation recognized his poetry; of the three professors who nominated him, only one had read the novel.) Pasternak refused the award but was expelled from the writers' union anyway—the only person who voted against the resolution was Stalin's sister-in-law. In his remaining years Pasternak was denied royalties from the book, and after his death his mistress Olga Ivinskaya and her daughter, who'd received a briefcase of money from the Italians in a bit lifted from *The Pink Panther*, were sent to a labor camp.

Is *Dr. Zhivago* a good novel? Not according to Nabokov, who called it "a sorry thing, clumsy, trite, and melodramatic, with stock situations, voluptuous lawyers, unbelievable girls, romantic robbers, and trite coincidences," and declared that Ivinskaya must have written it. (He may have been sore that anticommunism proved more popular than nymphets, capable of knocking *Lolita* off the top spot on the *New York*



Times bestseller list.) Even those who admired *Dr. Zhivago* did so as one might an idiot savant. For a humanistic epic of love and war, no matter how trite, to come from a Russian pen—it was like finding a pearl in a mussel shell.

Sharing the Nobel short list with Pasternak in 1958 was Karen Blixen, who published under the name Isak Dinesen, and Alberto Moravia, whose psychologically brilliant *AGOSTINO* (New York Review Books, \$14.95, nyrb.com) is now available in a new translation by Michael F. Moore. Only Moravia could have written such a nasty and perfect “beach read.” Cutting and cunning, *Agostino* ranks with the bitterness of *Boredom* and the hollow wallow of *Contempt*.

We meet thirteen-year-old Agostino and his widowed mother at a seaside vacation spot, rowing a *pattino* across “the smooth, diaphanous early morning sea.” One day a young man joins them on their daily ride, and Agostino’s “big and beautiful” mother, “still in her prime,” begins to flirt. She used to jump easily in and out of the boat, but now she pretends to require help; she, who was so dignified and “serene,” now sings with happiness “in a melodious voice with pathetic trills that made Agostino’s skin crawl.” He hears her kisses with the young man, and they sound like choking. Rejected and angry, Agostino takes up with a band of rough boys who talk dirty, smoke cigarettes, and steal fruit under the wing of a six-fingered pederastic boatman. Agostino

is wealthy and the gang is poor; he takes to dressing shabbily, and is eventually mistaken for the boatman’s son. A rich family pays him to row them out to sea.

Moravia said that *Agostino*’s “premise is the work of two great unmaskers, Marx and Freud,” and the book cannily shows clumsy sexual awakening intertwined with a vague, dawning awareness of class. Sickened at his mother’s body, Agostino realizes that she has been a woman all along; roughhousing with the gang, he learns what they do, or think about doing, to women. The final insult in this summer of shame is the boy’s inability to do the same. His mother unwittingly gives him the money to buy a whore, but the madam thinks he looks too young; the kindest of the cruel boys takes the cash and goes in without him. Flaubert’s Frédéric Moreau remembered his unconsummated flight from a brothel as his best time, innocent and irresponsible. These are Agostino’s worst days, days of powerlessness and hunger, stuck in the desert between thought and action.

*Agostino* failed to pass muster with Mussolini in 1941, when it was written, and three years elapsed before it could be published. But though Moravia was suppressed by the state, he is not so easy to resurrect as a protest artist. During the war he did a favor for the anti-fascists, and then a favor for the fascists. Years later he reflected on his equal-opportunity espionage with cold, wry distance. “All this seemed very literary to me, and therefore it amused me,” he said. ■



View of the Town and Gulf of Salerno, by Achille Etna Michallon  
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# Turning Toward Home

## REFLECTIONS ON THE FAMILY FROM HARPER'S MAGAZINE

Some of our most loving—and most difficult—relationships are with our parents, children, siblings, and extended families. These complicated relationships are the foundation of our society and our lives: they define our past, give us hope for the future, teach us to get along with others, and, often, provide excellent examples of how not to behave. The moving essays in *Turning Toward Home*, all of which were originally published in *Harper's Magazine*, gracefully explore these dynamics. Authors include David Mamet, Donna Tartt, Richard Ford, Sallie Tisdale, Louise Erdrich, and many more. Introduction by Verlyn Klinkenborg.

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# MASTER OF THE MUNDANE

Karl Ove Knausgaard's encyclopedic novels

By Francine Prose

Discussed in this essay:

*My Struggle: Book Three*, by Karl Ove Knausgaard. Archipelago. 300 pages. \$27.  
archipelagobooks.org.



Few of us are glad to be seated, on a long-distance flight, next to a loquacious stranger who ignores the signals of our open book, our headphones, the sleep mask we pull down over our eyes. Imagine, then, that the stranger in question is a craggy, middle-aged Norwegian determined to tell us everything that ever happened to him—every boyhood memory, every random association or metaphysical speculation, every song he listened to,

Francine Prose is the author, most recently, of *Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932* (Harper). She is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine.

every book he read, every detail he can recall about his parents, his first friendships, his three children's personalities, the diapers he changed, the meals he cooked, and the highs and lows of his marriages. Would we like to hear about how much his father liked seafood, or about the eating habits of an airport Burger King customer? The situation is not all that difficult to imagine, but what seems far more improbable is that we might actually become riveted by our companion's story.

That unlikely scenario approximates the unusual experience—and the mystery—of reading Karl Ove Knaus-

gaard's *My Struggle*, a dense, complex, and (judging from the three volumes that have so far appeared in English) brilliant six-volume work, totaling more than 3,500 pages, that might be described as a cross between a memoir and an autobiographical novel. The series has been a critical and popular success in Europe, where it has won several important literary prizes. It was a sensation in Norway, its notoriety boosted by Knausgaard's nervy decision to borrow the title (*Min Kamp*, in Norwegian) of Hitler's literary call to arms and by the media scandals that erupted when his ex-wife and uncle objected to the way in which they had been portrayed.

In a masterful translation by Don Bartlett that follows Knausgaard's tonal shifts between the colloquial and the lyric, the first two volumes, subtitled *A Death in the Family* and *A Man in Love*, were published in English in 2012 and 2013, respectively. They gained a cult following, especially among writers, that has gradually broadened to include a larger base of readers, most of whom agree that this is an unclassifiable work, a genre of its own. Knausgaard has frequently been compared to Proust, but in fact the two writers have little in common except the length and ambition of their books and their fascination with memory. Even at their most poetic, Knausgaard's sentences are shorter and punchier than Proust's, less ornately strung with dependent clauses. And Knausgaard seems obsessed less with recapturing the past than with escaping it. It is a tribute to his prodigious grace and skill that although he goes on and on about himself, *My Struggle* possesses not a hint of the narcissism and solipsism that tend to mar memoirs and autobiographical novels.

The third volume, *Boyhood*, was released in May, and is (like the first half of *A Death in the Family*) an account of the author's childhood—his loving but distant mother, his tyrannical father, his adored elder brother, Yngve, his teachers and neighbors, and the local girls who become the objects of his first romantic obsessions. What *Boyhood* shares with its predecessors is not just Knausgaard's alternations between narration and essayistic rumination but also its author's determination to include everything, no matter how prosaic, trivial, or embarrassing. Noth-



ing is held back, nothing is left out—not the party at which he gets drunk and alienates his wife's friends, not the childhood game in which he and a friend defecate in the woods and later return to see what time and nature have done to the turds they've left in the forest.

*Boyhood* poses the same questions as the previous books: How do we construct a self from each experience and impression? How can the ghosts of the past be exorcised? And why, given the volumes' unexceptional subject matter and the author's encyclopedic approach, is the series nonetheless so *hypnotic*, a word that keeps cropping up in reviews? Why do we follow, with breathless excitement, the seventy-page account, in *A Death in the Family*, of the teenage Karl Ove's efforts to procure beer for a New Year's Eve gathering? Why do we so happily indulge his description, in *Boyhood*, of how he liked his breakfast cereal?

In this new volume, Karl Ove (as the character is called) could be Everyboy. He and his friends, a ragtag gang of Scandinavian Huckleberry Finns, search for the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, play soccer, start fires, and visit the local dump to watch some guys shoot rats. They learn to swim, go fishing, pore over a treasured cache of porn. They grow older, compete on the playing field, in their classrooms, and in a school election. Karl Ove joins a terrible rock band with the generationally perfect name of Blood Clot and falls in love with a succession of girls who ditch him for more attractive and popular boys. He wrecks an early romance by persuading his sweetheart that they should try to break the local record for length of time spent kissing; he is mocked by the other kids when his mother buys him a swimming cap decorated with flowers; a family crisis erupts when he loses a sock. "Landscape in childhood," Karl Ove writes of this lost-forever world in which he came of age,

is not like the landscape that follows later; they are charged in very different ways. In that landscape every rock, every tree had a meaning, and because everything was seen for the first time and because it was seen so many times, it was anchored in the depths of your consciousness, not as something vague

or approximate, the way a landscape outside a house appears to an adult if they close their eyes and it has to be summoned forth, but as something with immense precision and detail. In my mind, I have only to open the door and go outside for the images to come streaming towards me. The gravel in the driveway, almost bluish in color in the summer. Oh, that alone, the driveways of childhood!

Knausgaard is determined to record not only the incidents of the past but also the child's way of seeing the world, before that bright view is dulled and tarnished by age. (In an interview with *The Believer* last year, he called the whole of *My Struggle* "infantile": "It seems like a child has written it. There are childishness, stupidity, lack of wisdom, fantasies. At the same time, that's where my creativity can be found.")

The freshness of childhood, but also the fear. In *A Death in the Family*, we witnessed Karl Ove's Pavlovian response to his father's presence. Just the sound of Dad's footsteps on the stairs was enough to inspire a watchful unease, perpetually on the brink of panic. And so too in the third volume the boyhood idylls come to a halt whenever Dad appears onstage to perform his petty acts of cruelty, impatience, and injustice. As stern, omnipotent, and implacable as the Old Testament God, Dad is uninterested in the difference between intentional and accidental, disobedience and carelessness, innocence and guilt. Perhaps it's true that Karl Ove got five kroner from an old woman he and his friends helped by removing a fallen tree from a stream, but the punishment—slapping, ear-pulling, shouting, humiliation—is the same as if the boy were lying. When Dad's capricious unfairness makes the child cry, his tears not only shame him but further enrage Dad, whose son is weak enough to cry like a girl. After his father punishes him for eating too many apples by making him eat so many apples he nearly vomits, Karl Ove fantasizes,

I could hurl him against the wall or throw him down the stairs. I could grab him by the neck and smash his face against the table. That was how I could think, but the instant I was in the same room as he was, everything crumbled, he was my father, a grown

man, so much bigger than me that everything had to bend to his will. He bent my will as if it were nothing.

Yet Karl Ove monitors Dad for the slightest sign of approval and derives helpless joy from his father's infrequent moments of contentment. A trip to the fish market and the record store, where Karl Ove's choice of music (Elvis!) pleases Dad, ends with an almost ecstatic interlude during which Dad shows his son how to "cure" the warts on his hands by rubbing them with bacon grease. The pair's tense relationship continues until, three quarters of the way through *Boyhood*, Dad leaves for Bergen, on Norway's western coast, to "major in Nordic literature and become a senior teacher." "Many years later," Karl Ove tells us, "he was to say that Bergen was where he started drinking."

That last sentence will be extremely ominous to anyone who has read *A Death in the Family*; everything that happens in the latest installment is shadowed by what we have already read. This is the result of Knausgaard's inspired decision to tell his story not chronologically but thematically, and to begin the series (more or less) at the end, with the death of the father whose influence he has spent his adult life trying to escape. The first volume starts with a meditation on death, features the aftermath of what may be the most horrific (and the most squalid) demise in literature, and concludes with Karl Ove contemplating his father's corpse:

And death, which I have always regarded as the greatest dimension of life, dark, compelling, was no more than a pipe that springs a leak, a branch that cracks in the wind, a jacket that slips off a clothes hanger and falls to the floor.

For some time, Dad had been living with his mother, Karl Ove's grandmother, drinking himself to death, while Grandma, intermittently aware of her surroundings, feeble, incontinent, and forced to witness the spectacle of her son's slow suicide, kept up with him. Mother and son have constructed a sort of fortress of garbage; the rooms of Grandma's house are full of hundreds of liquor bottles, filthy clothes, old newspapers, rotten food; the furniture



is covered with excrement. The brothers must clean up the mess. Knausgaard spares us nothing—we see the sheetless, “piss-permeated” mattress and decomposing clothes; the prodigious tubs of Ajax, Jif, Mr. Muscle, Klorin; his own bouts of weeping and vomiting.

We read *Boyhood* with a highly particular combination of foresight and hindsight, knowing the destination to which Dad and Grandma are heading. When Karl Ove tells us how much he loves his grandmother, who smells good and is generous with physical affection, we cannot forget the heartbreaking old woman who will wind up as Dad’s housemate and drinking buddy, in whose living room Dad will die. Afterward, she will try to manipulate her visiting grandsons into having a drink and will urinate on the floor in the midst of a conversation.

**B**oyhood captures a thing rarely seen in literature: “the conversion of a child into a person as it is happening,” as John Berryman said of Anne Frank’s diary. Reading about young Karl Ove is a bit like watching the childhood home movies of a friend—we observe the physical features and personality quirks that will harden and become visible in the adult we know. Karl Ove’s best male friend and confidant in *A Man in Love* is Geir, with whom he has soul-searching Dostoevskian conversations about human nature and literature. In *Boyhood*, we again meet Geir, this time in an earlier incarnation as Karl Ove’s childhood best friend and partner in mischief.

We already know about Karl Ove’s propensity for erotic obsession: in *A Man in Love*, that mania focuses on Linda, a poet and writer (and sufferer from bipolar disorder), who eventually becomes his wife and the mother of his three children. In *Boyhood*, too, Karl Ove becomes infatuated, this time with a procession of local girls who tend to merge in the reader’s mind into one girl whom he cannot stop thinking about, who shows a passing interest in him—and then dumps him. The naïve agonies Karl Ove endures over these crushes in *Boyhood* seem like innocent rehearsals for the scene, in *A Man in Love*, in which, rejected by Linda, he returns to his room at a writer’s seminar and delib-

erately cuts his face with a shard of glass. A broken heart, a squalid death, a lifelong friendship: it is Knausgaard’s structure as much as his subject that shades every moment, no matter how seemingly mundane, with significance.

In the first three books of *My Struggle*, Knausgaard mostly lets us draw our own conclusions about his parents’ marriage, which seems to involve efforts on the part of both spouses to find pressing professional reasons for living apart. By contrast, they contain an unusually complete dissection of Karl Ove’s marriage to Linda, alternately passionate, resentful, joyous, tedious, grateful, and contentious. In the publicity surrounding *My Struggle*, there’s been a surprisingly intense interest in his description in *A Man in Love* of his mixed feelings about changing his children’s diapers. It is rare to find a male author so engaged by (and so honest about) the profound pleasures and the numbing boredom of parenthood, and the problem—nearly always considered a woman’s problem, though serious women novelists tend not to write about it, either—of how to balance the demands of being a writer with the very different demands of raising children.

Karl Ove’s anxieties are partly the result of his fear that he and Yngve will repeat Dad’s failures, of his uncertainty about “whether what Dad had handed down to us was in our bone marrow or whether it would be possible to break free.” In *Boyhood*, he reflects,

I have my own children and with them I have tried to achieve only one aim: that they shouldn’t be afraid of their father. They aren’t. I know that. When I enter a room, they don’t cringe, they don’t look down at the floor, they don’t dart off as soon as they glimpse an opportunity, no, if they look at me, it is not a look of indifference, and if there is anyone I am happy to be ignored by, it is them. If there is anyone I am happy to be taken for granted by, it is them.

By the time we reach this section, we understand what this small familial happiness has cost him. Karl Ove struggles with the shaming but undeniable fact that pushing a stroller and bringing his children to classes and parties makes him feel emasculated. In the second book, we read about the toll taken on both Karl Ove and Linda by their bickering over housework and child care:

I wanted the maximum amount of time for myself with the fewest disturbances possible. I wanted Linda, who was already at home looking after Heidi, to take care of everything that concerned Vanja so that I could work.... All our conflicts and arguments were in some form or another about this, the dynamics. If I couldn’t write because of her and her demands, I would leave her, it was as simple as that.... The way I took my revenge was to give her everything she wanted, that is, I took care of the children, I cleaned the floors, I washed the clothes, I did the food shopping, I cooked and earned all the money so that she had nothing tangible to complain about, as far as I and my role in the family were concerned. The only thing I didn’t give her, and it was the only thing she wanted, was my love. That was how I took my revenge.

The very things that keep Karl Ove from writing—the responsibilities of being a husband and a father—become the subject of his writing in the moments he is freed from them. Whereas many novelists take us on the whaling voyage or the safari—as far as possible from the trivia of daily life—Knausgaard trains his eye entirely on trivia, making from it an orchestral plot peopled by characters who happen to be his family (or himself). In his completist determination, he is willing to surrender his privacy, his dignity, and the impulse to seem like a good person. As Knausgaard told *The Paris Review* last year, it was in fact “the belief that the feeling of shame or guilt signified relevance that finally made me write about myself, the most shameful act of all.”

There are few activities more private or intimate than reading. It is something we do in solitude and quiet, yet the paradox is that when we read we are allowing—inviting—another voice to speak to us, in silence. The voice of *My Struggle*—as well as its cast—take up permanent residence in our consciousness. For how can we not be changed by 3,500 pages of such personal narrative? Afterward, we can never see a father pushing a stroller or a boy riding his bike without thinking of Karl Ove. Indeed, our interest is sustained in large part by our relentless, almost brutal intimacy with the characters: they are a family we know almost as well as we know our own. ■



# STRANGE LOOP

Robert Coover returns to realism

By Robert Moor

Discussed in this essay:

*The Brunist Day of Wrath*, by Robert Coover. Dzanc Books. 1,100 pages. \$30.  
dzancbooks.org.



One evening in December 1951, a coal mine in southern Illinois combusted and collapsed. An observer later remarked that it looked as if a bomb had been dropped into a subway. A chance spark or cigarette had lit

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a pocket of marsh gas, and fire flooded the mine's vasculature, splintering timbers, overturning heavy machinery, and bending steel rails into fishhooks. The men closest to the blast were carbonized. Those farther away felt only a warm wind and an uncomfortable pressure in their ears as the tunnels went black.

The Orient No. 2 explosion was the deadliest the country had seen in

decades. Some 120 men were entombed. Within hours the blocked tunnels began filling with carbon monoxide; rescuers recalled the sight of pigeons roosting in the mine's elevator shaft dropping dead. The trapped men curtained themselves off from the gas (a technique called bratticing) and awaited rescue, but many knew it would not come in time. They wrote farewell notes to their families on cigarette packages, cough-drop boxes, whatever they could find. ("I love you all way. I go tonight with Christ. I love Him too.") A group of about a dozen men poured water on the dirt and buried their heads in it, hoping to escape the gas.

After three days of rescue efforts, all those inside the mine were presumed dead. Then, on Christmas Eve, 550 feet underground, rescue workers wearing gas masks found a survivor lying among the dead. His name was Cecil Sanders, a sickly and by all reports pious man. From his hospital bed, Sanders sang "Amazing Grace" for a national radio audience. He told reporters that "nobody but God had anything to do" with his rescue, which he called "a miracle." (Doctors speculated that his many years spent in the mine had gradually accustomed his body to the gas.)

A few miles away, the junior high school basketball court was converted into a morgue. Bodies were brought in and laid out on the floor to be identified. Blood seeped into the wood; the smell was "terrific," remembered one witness. A nineteen-year-old reporter named Robert Coover, dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans, sat in the bleachers taking notes. Home from college on break, he had agreed to help out the paper his father managed, the *Herrin Daily Journal*, which was short-staffed. His assignment was to transcribe the names of the dead.

Every great writer, it seems, has a formative horror. For some it is a war, an illness, an abuse, an abandonment, a death. For Coover it was an explosion. The scrabbling for meaning that followed the disaster—the rumors, the prayer vigils, the journalists picking over the wreckage—gave him a riddle he has spent his career unraveling: How are myths made, and how can they be unmade?



Coover's first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, published in 1966, centered on the lone survivor of a coal-mining disaster. It established Coover's reputation as an author of gritty and ambitious social-realist novels. Coover once told an interviewer for *The Antioch Review* that he wrote *The Origin* in a conventional style "thinking that it might be the last piece of my writing read by a general public." His true passion lay in composing the crumbly, self-aware novels and short stories that would later be labeled meta-fiction. *The Origin* was meant to be his *Meet The Beatles!*, a sacrifice laid at the feet of the American marketplace before he could drop acid and make *Sgt. Pepper's*.

The book was not a bestseller, but it garnered critical praise. John Gardner—who would later call Coover a "closet fascist" on account of his fervent (but decidedly unfascistic) insistence that truth is constructed and relative—deemed *The Origin* "brilliant" and "superb." The William Faulkner Foundation agreed, giving Coover its 1966 award for best first novel, which Thomas Pynchon and Cormac McCarthy had won in preceding years.

"The strength of this novel derives from the old traditions," wrote Webster Schott in the *New York Times*. "It brings us the news about mining, petty journalism, small-town non-culture and the weird fusion of truth and wish that sometimes underpins religious belief." Schott predicted: "If he can somehow control his Hollywood gigantism and focus his vision of life, he may become heir to Dreiser or Lewis."

In the nineteen books that followed, Coover made a mockery of this advice. His subsequent work was brilliantly unfocused and antirealist. And in contrast to the ice-flat *nouveaux romans* coming out of France, Coover's novels were feverish, lewd, and most of all *funny*. According to the novelist Hari Kunzru, Coover

broke open the carapace of postwar American realism to reveal a fantastical funhouse of narrative possibilities. His relentless experimentalism, combined with a sly and often bawdy humor, have made him a writer's writer,

a hero to those who feel smothered by the marshmallowy welter of pseudo-literary romance that dominates contemporary fiction.

In April, Coover surprised his readers once again, by publishing a sequel to his first novel. It marks a return not only to the mining town where he grew up but also to the traditional style he long ago abandoned.

Robert Lowell Coover grew up in the I section of the national bookshelf: Iowa, Indiana, and Illinois. His grandfather was a traveling Methodist preacher, his father a choir director. As an adolescent, Coover awoke to the existence of godlessness only when, one Sunday, a man sitting next to him in church refused to take communion. He asked the man why. The man responded: "Oh, I don't believe any of this stuff. I just come here because I like to sing."

Coover's agnosticism slowly crystallized into atheism as he floated through one college and the next, trying his hand at zoology and psychology before finally graduating from Indiana University with a degree in Slavic studies. He enlisted in the Navy to avoid being drafted into the Korean War, and was sent to Germany, where he worked in cryptography. His mission was to transcribe and decode Soviet radio messages. It was hopeless work: the codes were mechanically set and automatically shifted every day, making for months of Hellerian absurdity. Instead of transcribing the intercepted messages, bored officers would sometimes listen to country music and simply jot down letters at random.

In the library of his naval base in Bremerhaven, Coover discovered the four horsemen of postmodern fiction—Beckett, Borges, Cervantes, and Kafka—and resolved to become a writer. In order to get started, he went to live alone on an island on a lake in Canada. (He would later write a short story for this magazine, called "Beginnings," that began: "In order to get started, he went to live alone on an island and shot himself." Tom Wolfe would cite that line as the epitome of all that was wrong with contemporary fiction.) Among Coover's scant belongings were a Bible and a pile of

Beckett, which he read from Genesis to Revelation, *Murphy* to *Molloy*. He chose his reading list carefully. Two distinct questions gnawed at him. The first was the paradox of biblical belief—its pervasiveness despite its apparent falsifiability. The second was how to write a new kind of fiction. To him, these problems were inextricable.

Though he was no longer a believer, Coover found the Bible's mythic residue, as he would later come to call it, impervious to rational argument; it had wormed down too deep into the language and the culture. Drawing on the philosopher Karl Jaspers's assertion that myth must be confronted on myth's own ground, Coover began prying at Christian lore from within. In Beckett he had found a new voice, fractured and absurd, which he began using to rewrite biblical narratives. He wrote a story about the Flood told from the perspective of Noah's brother, who is cruelly left behind as the waters rise.

I'm figurin maybe I got a day left if the rain keeps comin and it don't show no signs of stoppin and I can't see my brother's boat no more gone just water how *how* did he know? that bastard ...

He wrote another about a profoundly sexually frustrated Joseph, who dies in a tavern when a laugh curdles into "a fit of consumptive coughing." In "Beginnings," the protagonist begins (but presumably never finishes) a story about Lazarus

in which Jesus, having had the dead man dragged from the tomb and unwrapped, couldn't seem to get the hang of bringing him around. There was an awful stink, the Jews crowding around were getting sick, and Jesus, sweating, was saying: Heh heh, bear with me, folks! Won't be a minute! If I can just get it started, the rest'll come easy!

The first of Coover's stories to be published, however, was one he'd penned years earlier, as an undergraduate at Indiana University, called "Blackdamp." It describes a coal-mining disaster as witnessed by a woman whose boorish husband is trapped inside. Coover sent the story off to Saul Bellow's new literary magazine, *The Noble Savage*. It was pub-



lished in the fourth issue. Encouraged, he sent the editors some of his more experimental stories. Bellow and his co-editors rejected them, finding them "sensationalist" and lacking in the "human content of art." Other editors had a similar reaction; Coover was asked repeatedly whether he had another story like that one about the coal mine.

"So I began to invent one," Coover later told an interviewer, "and that's how *The Origin of the Brunists* was born."

**T**he *Origin of the Brunists* is set in the Midwestern town of West Condon. One day in January, the local coal mine blows up. The high school gym is converted into a temporary morgue. A newspaperman collects the names of the dead. He regards the scene—"black bodies, burnt and gas bloated"—with unblinking clarity. A woman asks the attendants to remove the shoe of one of the corpses, to check whether it has a corn plaster like the one she applied to her husband's foot before his shift:

The shoeless foot stuck out screaming nude on the end of the black leg, a blistery glowing pink vegetable thing attached to the charred leg stump like a mushroom. There was a corn plaster too, but the woman didn't think it was the same kind.

The disaster spares only one miner: Giovanni Bruno, who is found alive but catatonic. The free indirect perspective jumps from character to character, but the narrative is never filtered through Bruno's consciousness; he forms the novel's hollow core. Around his bedside gather a motley group of zealots, each interpreting the miracle of his survival in a different way. One, the widow of a Nazarene preacher who died in the mine, believes her husband's garbled farewell letter—"I dissobeyed and I know I must Die. Listen allways to the Holy Spirit in your Harts Abide in Grace. We will stand Together befor Our Lord the 8th of..."—is a prophecy. Another claims to receive messages from an extra-dimensional being named Domiron. A third is a numerologist who scans the papers for omens. Their belief systems cross-pollinate, and the loose

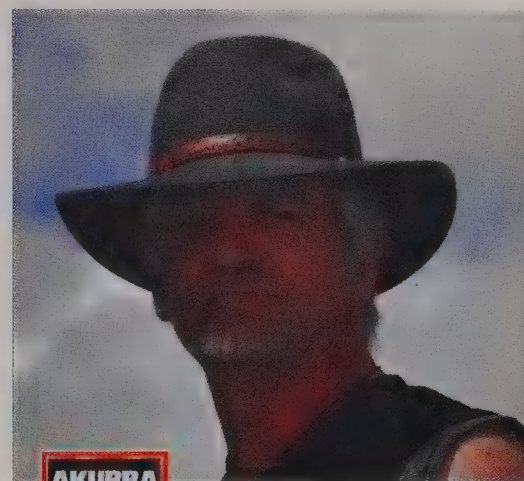
cluster of followers clots into a cult. When Bruno awakes and begins making gnomonic pronouncements, his followers, the titular Brunists, interpret his mumbling to foretell a looming rapture.

A book as sprawling and multifaceted as this cannot be said to have a proper protagonist; or, as the novelist Brian Evenson has pointed out, the town of West Condon is the protagonist. But just as *The Wire* refracts our outrage at Baltimore's corruption through Jimmy McNulty, the reader sees West Condon through Justin "Tiger" Miller, who callously deceives the Brunists in order to infiltrate their ranks. Miller, a former local basketball star turned newspaper editor, has a mind like Hume and a libido like Hef. For him, journalism, like sex, is all the more fun because its rules are so easily bent:

Once a day, six days a week and sometimes seven, year in, year out, the affairs of West Condon were compressed into a set of conventionally accepted signs and became, in the shape of the *West Condon Chronicle*, what most folks in town thought of as life, or history.... That its publisher and editor, Justin Miller, sometimes thought of himself as in the entertainment business and viewed his product, based as it was on the technicality of the recordable fact, as a kind of benevolent hoax, probably only helped to make the paper greater.

On the prognosticated Day of Redemption, the Brunists gather atop a knoll nicknamed Cunt Hill, which overlooks the mine. The event has been highly publicized in advance by Miller, and a crowd forms to watch. A group of drunks set up concession stands and hawk tickets to the event, transforming a figurative media circus into a literal one. It begins to rain, and the cult's inevitable clash with the Catholic, Presbyterian, and Baptist townsfolk arrives, but the apocalypse does not. "The Powers of Darkness had stormed the holy Mount," rhapsodizes Miller, "throwing the Sons of Light into dungeons or dispersion, and so there were none there to whom God might, in proper glory, come."

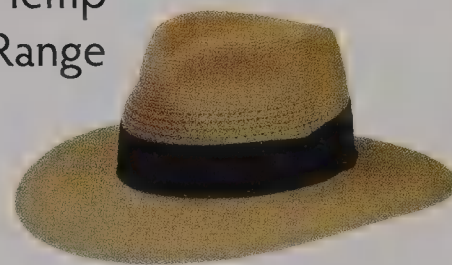
The Brunists splinter. Signs shift and waver. Light—a holy symbol for the cult—takes on different meanings



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for different leaders. Clara Collins, the preacher's widow, begins baptizing her followers in the light of a miner's headlamp. The hellfire-spitting preacher Abner Baxter prefers baptisms by firelight. For the scientological Elaine Norton, who moves with her husband out to California, holy light is the glow of a television. The Brunists adapt and spread, territory is divided, bishops named. Thus, Coover implies, forms the great feedback loop of the world: tragedy transmuted into myth, myth into belief, belief into religion, religion into division, division into violence, and violence into further tragedy.

Despite the novel's noisy polyvalency, its message comes through clearly. Near the end of the book, though, one can feel the tenor bending weirdly, as if Coover is smoothing the reader's transition into the more experimental works to follow: *The Origin* concludes with a long, rambling joke about Judgment Day, in which heaven becomes so bureaucratically bogged down in processing the billions of new arrivals that God quits.

Coover's second novel, 1968's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, completed his transition to a new literary form. It is a metafictional novel, but not in the sense of those "dreadfully predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing," as William H. Gass once wrote. The book's protagonist becomes so absorbed in his tabletop baseball dice game that the imaginary players' lives gradually take over the narrative. By the end of the novel, Waugh has disappeared altogether, and the players ponder the existence of God (or "the record keeper"), practice rituals, and divide into religious factions.

Coover's next book, the 1969 short-story collection *Pricksongs and Descants*, also pranked the reader's unconscious assumptions about narrative structure. The book's three most famous stories—"The Babysitter," "The Magic Poker," and "The Elevator"—are direct attacks on story logic; rather than following a linear plot, the stories unfold in a series of permutations in which everything that can happen happens. In his review of the collection for the *New York Times*, Gass compared

these stories to a deck of cards, in that they could be shuffled and read in any order. It is no accident that Coover would later become the nation's most visible proponent of hypertextual fiction, nor that a later story collection would include a story printed on a deck of actual playing cards.

The core of *Pricksongs*—and the bulk of Coover's career—is composed of stories that reanimate ancient folktales and fairy tales, even television. He often picks up the story line of a beloved character years after the end of the original narrative. So we see Jack as an aging lumberman, feeling more like the surly giant than a sprightly adventurer; Beauty, grown old, resenting the "doggy stink" of the Beast; and Pan leading a flock of ragged sheep through city parks in a technodystopia. When successful, the new myth smudges the original; I, for one, cannot read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* without thinking of Coover's remix, in which Alice is still underground, bloated, menopausal, "her whole body like a huge squeezed sponge."

Coover's cartoons are not mere parody. The purpose of parody is to make a familiar form look ridiculous. Coover's aim is to make a familiar form look alien. Or demonic, in the case of his third novel, *The Public Burning* (1977). The book begins like a conventional history of the Red Scare—it was exhaustively researched—but soon veers into hyperbole. At the novel's end, the masses gather in Times Square to watch the "burning" (electrocution) of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The narration vacillates between the voice of an omniscient narrator, the clownish musings of Vice President Richard Nixon, and the folksy prattle of Uncle Sam (a.k.a. Sam Slick), whose monologues are cut-and-pasted from those of past presidents: "Nothin' is sartin but death, taxes, God's glowin' Covenant, enlightened self-interest, certain unalienated rights, and woods, woods, woods, as far as the world extends!" (That last phrase was plucked from a biography of Abraham Lincoln.) *The Public Burning* briefly made the *Times* bestseller list and very nearly got Coover sued by Nixon, whose character, in the book's epilogue, is graphically raped by Uncle Sam.



In this fashion, Coover worked his way through the American story-book. But the urgency of his writing has waned the further he strays from the myths of lived life: politics, religion, and love. His fairy tales—like *Briar Rose*, the story of a sleeping beauty who never awakes—while gorgeously rendered, can overtax and underwhelm. “Emptiness, the hollow interior, haunts the writer of metafiction when he assaults ossified forms and exhausted language,” warned the critic Neil Schmitz. David Foster Wallace, who considered Coover and Nabokov “real geniuses,” argued that metafiction had once served a purpose but had quickly begun to self-cannibalize: “Metafiction’s real end has always been Armageddon,” he told an interviewer in 1993. “Art’s reflection on itself is terminal ... It spirals in on itself. By the mid-Seventies, I think, everything useful about the mode had been exhausted ... By the Eighties it had become a god-awful trap.”

**B**ack in 1964, even before he finished revising the 950-page draft of *The Origin* down to its final 650 pages, Coover began making notes for a sequel. In fact, he wrote to his friend James Ballowe that he was considering writing a trilogy, the second and third parts then tentatively entitled “The Elder’s Tract on Sacrifice” and “The Brunists’ Holy March.” “All of which proves,” he wrote, “that I’m either a glutton for punishment or, running a little scared, I am laying up a reserve larder in case of coming bad times.” He dragged that larder around for forty years.

For a time, Coover hoped that millennial evangelicalism of the kind he had lampooned in *The Origin* was fading, obviating the need for a sequel. Then he witnessed the rise and reign of George W. Bush. “This kind of mad apocalyptic view of the world ... hasn’t gone away,” he told an interviewer in 2008. “If anything, it’s worsened.” In 2006, he began revisiting his old notes.

We have few examples of great experimental writers returning to a conventional mode—Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice*, Susan Sontag’s *The Vol-*

*cano Lover*, Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. As in those cases, one thing that is immediately apparent in *The Brunist Day of Wrath* is its seemingly effortless polish. (By contrast, *The Origin* feels wildly uneven—one reviewer called the prose “craggy.”) *Wrath* begins, as *The Origin* did, with a prologue describing an out-of-town preacher traveling to West Condon. This time it’s one Joshua Jehoshaphat Jenkins, “whushing along through the rain-drenched countryside, the bus nosing out of lush farmlands and dark wet forests onto the gently undulant and somewhat barren coal basin that is to be, if his interview goes well, his new home.” He steps off the bus to find a town “in a state of terminal decay and depression”: prices up, wages down, the mine closed, the downtown scooped out, the bank failing, the countryside scarred by strip mines. Jenkins regards the whole community as “crazed with religion ... but in some ghastly medieval or else futuristic way.” The town’s Presbyterian preacher, Wesley Edwards, has ingested a loaf of white bread that he believes has transubstantiated into Christ in his belly, and wanders the streets raving.

It’s the same bad spiral, one coil down. On the outskirts of town, the Brunists—now the nation’s fastest-growing new Pentecostal church—have purchased a summer camp and are attracting followers from all over. Again signs are misinterpreted, again a date of rapture is set (7/7), and again they congregate on the Mount of Redemption, as do their enemies.

What arrives this time, though, is the horsemen of the apocalypse, in the form of a biker gang called the Wrath of God. The gang’s ringleader is only a teenager. His head is full of comic-book notions; his rousing orations are described as “short, snappy, in words that would fit inside a speech balloon.” His Bunday-dotted worldview colors the prose, particularly at the novel’s climax, when the biker gang lays waste the town. Realists will likely balk at this turn, but Coover’s fans will read it as an extension of his core philosophy: The stories we live by shape the reality we live in. If we keep telling ourselves that apocalypse

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is right around the bend, one day it will be.

At its weakest points, *Wrath* can feel like an overgrown movie sequel. (The book is larger than its predecessor in every way; it is 1,005 pages long and features a cast of more than 150 characters.) At its best, it makes *The Origin* feel like a mere prelude. What ultimately redeems (and transforms) the book is the character of Sally Elliot, who is both insightful and exhaustingly pretentious. An aspiring writer home for the summer from college, she flaunts her newfound rebellious streak—sunbathing topless at the public pool and hand-printing T-shirts with Nietzschean axioms like FAITH IS BELIEVING WHAT YOU KNOW AIN'T SO. From time to time, Elliot argues with a Lutheran minister named Konrad Dreyer. He takes issue with one of her T-shirts, which reads RELIGION IS MYTH-INFORMATION.

"But a myth is not a lie, Sally," Dreyer says. "It's a special kind of language used to symbolize certain realities beyond space and time. It is information." (One hallmark of Coover's maturity is his willingness to put wise words in the mouths of characters with whom he disagrees.)

Throughout the novel, Elliot scribbles in a journal, struggling to craft a new style of fiction. One moment, she is toying with folkloric language; the next, she ponders a style inflected by dream logic—"sensations of flow, flight, fall, heavy-limbed slowness, mazy disrupted travels"—that sounds suspiciously like Coover's own. Her musings hint that despite this book's conventional sheen Coover hasn't, in fact, turned away from metafiction. He has returned to realism only to debunk it:

Like religious people, conventional writers ... look upon the human story through a particular narrow lens, not crafted by them and belonging to generations of writers long dead. So conventional writers are no more realists than these fundamentalist Rapture nuts are. The true realists are the lens-breakers, always have been.

Perhaps because of her interest in unorthodox modes of perception, Elliot takes a special interest in the Bru-

nists, who in turn figure her an emissary of Satan and try, ultimately, to kill her. She escapes, returns to college, and enrolls in a writing workshop, where she submits one of her experimental short stories. Her professor dismisses it as a "whimsical misuse of a vibrant imagination" and urges her to write something closer to her heart. She begins writing about the disaster in West Condon. To her surprise, the story is accepted by a "prestigious national publication," and she receives a book offer from a "big New York publisher." As Elliot begins expanding the short story into a novel, Coover's final trick dawns on the reader. She is writing her formative horror, her *Origin*. The sequel has circled back and, gleefully, eaten its own tail.

At the novel's end, Elliot meets, then marries, a wealthy congressman with a hidden penchant for S&M. She lovingly compares him to "something out of a fairytale." He asks her to think of him, instead, as a character from one of the Victorian novels she dislikes.

"A kind of ambassador from them, as you might say," he quips.

"If it's your mission, Mr. Ambassador, to lure me into those tired woods, you will not succeed," Elliot replies. "It's the wildness I want." ■

### July Index Sources

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# PUZZLE

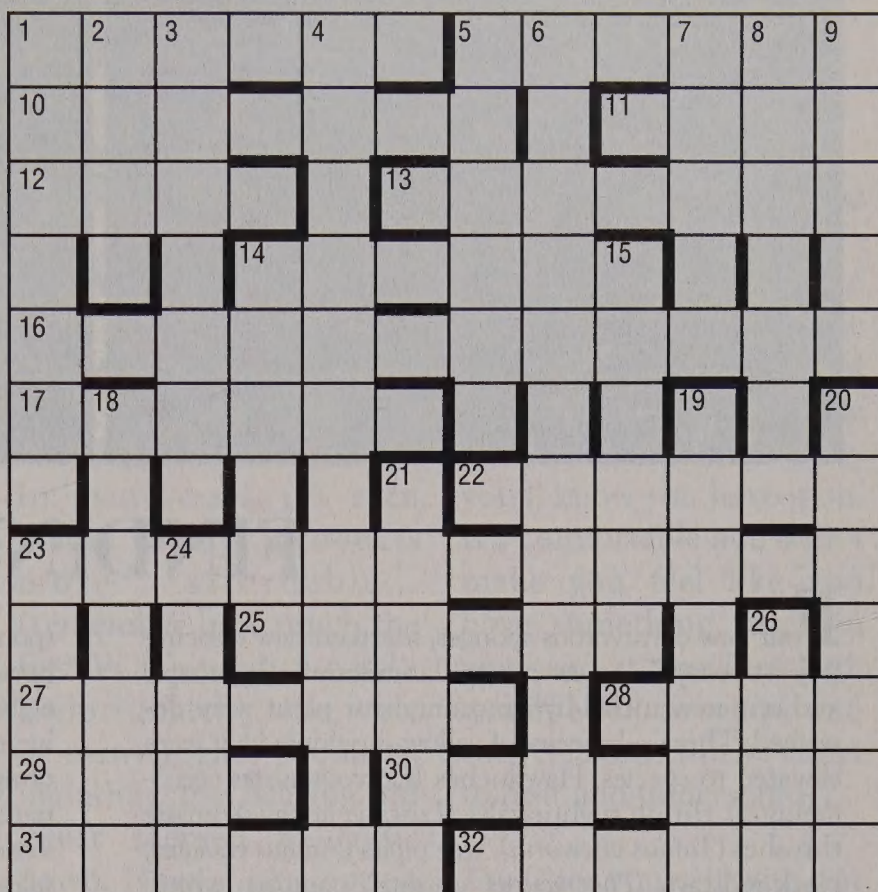
## SIXES AND SEVENS (AND TWELVES)

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

(with acknowledgments to Zander of The Listener)

**T**he clues to words of six, seven, and twelve letters are grouped separately. Solvers must determine where each answer belongs in the diagram, using answers to the numbered clues as a guide.

Answers include three proper nouns. The entry at 19D is an alternate spelling. As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 67.



### ACROSS

11. I got in with buddy in the 'hood for life (4)
12. Close arms toward the rear (4)
28. Part of flight that pushes necks forward (4)
29. E.g., *Elm Street's* decapitation: there's no end to it (4)

### DOWN

2. Provide man cave with a fork? Say you didn't do that (4)
7. Entering one by one, managed to become an extra in *Argo* (5)
9. Mail boxes I put out (5)
23. After the princess got offed, did it to me, too! (5)
24. Reactionary, unmoved, shows a bit of kindness at heart? Unreal! (5)
26. Jumbos or squirts (4)

### SIX-LETTER WORDS

- a. The least ordinary poems about death initially take a little time
- b. Notice something that grips counsel
- c. Sex empty? You're full of it, but you're excused
- d. Judge fools someone at the outset
- e. Woman burned up about her husband's death? Tut! Sadly, look around
- f. Repeatedly, drops in first indications of rain easily show eventual excessive saturation
- g. I'm right in front—enthralled by quiet, soft, tiny thing

- h. Gets into an office, lets CEO endlessly become agitated
- i. He prevents a pass. Can the Queen?
- j. Breaking rules, tenor gets fruit
- k. Something often deviated from puts me in a dither
- l. People encouraging a heartbreaking novelist?

### SEVEN-LETTER WORDS

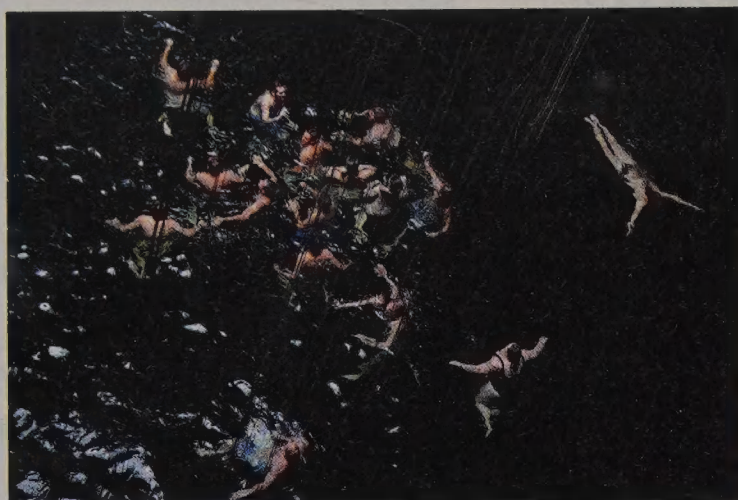
- a. Big plain articulated movements in ballet
- b. A coward gets the most out of work
- c. Medusa's masks put on
- d. General died in battle? The other way around, the way the wind is blowing!
- e. Date is portable food
- f. No techie diluted liquid
- g. Disease you can get from the beach? Quite the opposite!
- h. Banks are often jumped over
- i. One too big for his britches, as maestri might be
- j. Wayward father gets rings out, asks for reconsideration

### TWELVE-LETTER WORDS

- a. Screwing up as tenderfeet, use the bay to get rid of something
- b. Is one's mutual interaction coincidental?
- c. In perversion of altruism, get left imprisoned—it makes Man of Steel lead copper, perhaps
- d. After buildup, king takes care of overreaches

**Contest Rules:** Send completed diagram with name and address to "Sixes and Sevens (and Twelves)," *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's*, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by July 11. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the September issue. The winner of the May puzzle, "Theme and Variations," is N. Divine, San Diego.





## FINDINGS

**F**our new carnivorous sponges, fourteen new dancing frogs, twenty-four new caterpillar-mummifying wasps, and one new nickel-hyperaccumulator plant were described. Three subspecies of yellow-shouldered bat were elevated to species. Hawfinches (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*), thrush nightingales (*Luscinia luscinia*), mistle thrushes (*Turdus viscivorus*), tree pipits (*Anthus trivialis*), black redstarts (*Phoenicurus ochruros*), common white-throats (*Sylvia communis*), and wood warblers (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*) were found to have adapted to the ionizing radiation of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Czech and German deer still do not cross the Iron Curtain. Evolutionary anthropologists determined that individuals' allegiances in the Gombe chimpanzee war of 1974–1977 could have been predicted. A Brazilian marmoset was observed guarding, hugging, caressing, and attempting to copulate with his partner as she lay dying from a head injury. A bee and a butterfly were observed drinking the tears of a crocodilian. The Trail of Tears shortened the skulls of the Cherokee.

**T**our guides with easily pronounced names (Chung Jung-hee, Bodo Wallmeyer, Amira El-Naggar, Andrian Babeshko, Putali Angami) are perceived to be less risky and adventuresome, and more truthful, than those with difficult names (Hur Hye-seong, Svea Gelowicz, Mahbobeh Mir-Ma'soum, Yevgeny Dherzhinsky, Shagnik Ravunniarath). Moral dilemmas posed in foreign languages lead to more utilitarian choices. College students listening to fake laughter can tell that the sounds are human, whereas those listening to real laughter cannot. Fifteen-month-old babies prefer the fair distribution of toys unless unfairness benefits playmates of the same race. People in China's rice-growing regions are more cooperative than those in wheat-growing regions. Whiteflies (*Trialeurodes vaporariorum*) are confused by the commingled odors of tomato, watermelon, watercress, zucchini, cucumber, Savoy cabbage, and dwarf French beans. The smoke of Ulaanbaatar's indoor coal stoves causes

spontaneous abortions to peak in December. Therapeutic horsemanship reduces stress hormones in fifth through eighth graders, and horseplay increases the risk of vehicular crashes in teenage drivers. Americans who come of age during periods of high unemployment are less narcissistic, and those who enter the job market in recessions experience higher long-term job satisfaction. Rude sales staff increase the desirability of luxury goods. Men cannot make their voices sound sexy, whereas women can do so easily. Gender-nonconforming boys and girls are less likely to smoke cigars and use tanning beds, respectively; Brazilian cave beetles were discovered whose females possess penises, whose males possess vaginas, and who mate for forty to seventy hours at a time. Women with wider hips have more one-night stands.

**D**anish doctors unveiled an antidepressant helmet, and the U.S. Navy was working with scientists to develop ethical reasoning in robots. "To design a morally competent robot that interacts with humans," said a cognitive scientist, "we need to first get clear on how moral competence functions in humans." Multiplicitously perverse hemihelices were accidentally discovered by materials scientists using dichromatic rubber bands to imitate the color-changing abilities of cephalopods. Local anesthesia prevents injured squid who are pursued by black sea bass from practicing necessary vigilance. The failure of researchers to replicate numerous experimental results was explained by the discovery that lab rodents are highly stressed by male humans. Only 33 percent of female fat-head minnows survive mating with males who have been exposed to Prozac. Low blood sugar predicts crepuscular interspousal aggression. Americans whom researchers scared by insinuating the potential deceit of their romantic partners considered themselves closer to God. "The nice thing about God," said Kristin Laurin of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, "is that there is never any solid evidence that God has rejected you." Two crew members from 90210 were diagnosed with valley fever. ■

Photographs by Francine Fleischer from her series *Swim: The Water in Between*. Courtesy the artist

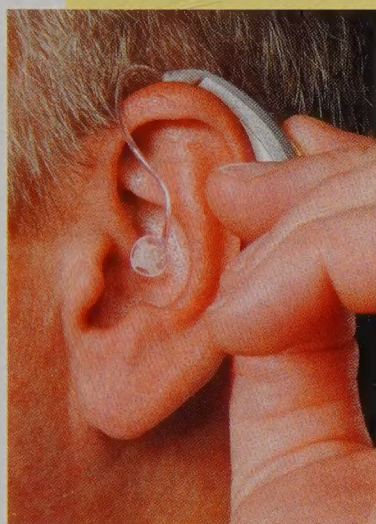


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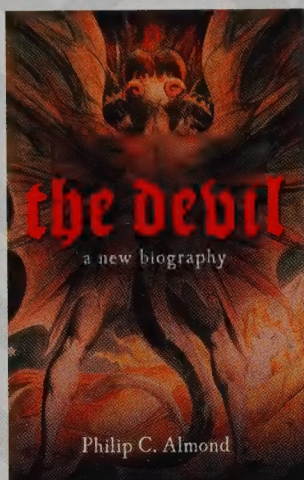
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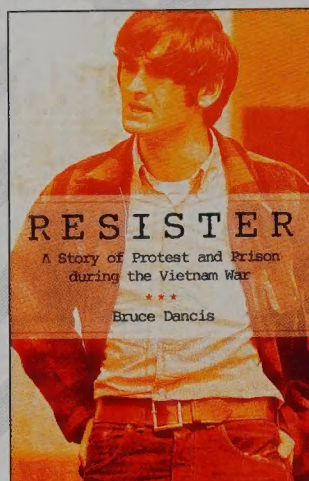


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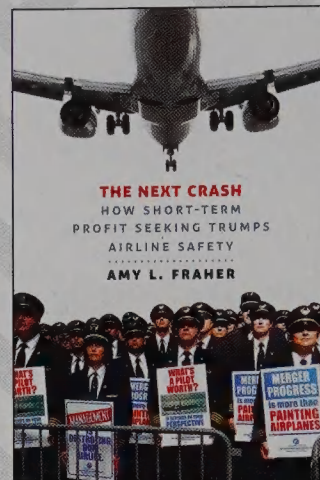
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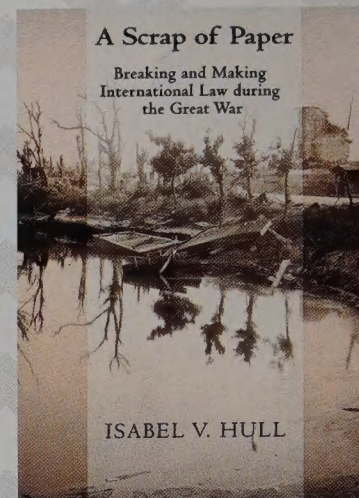
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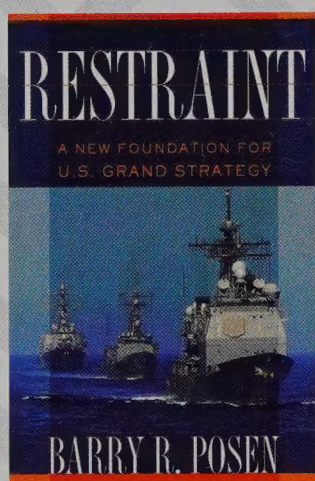
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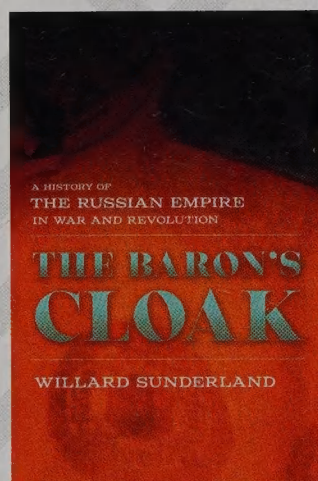
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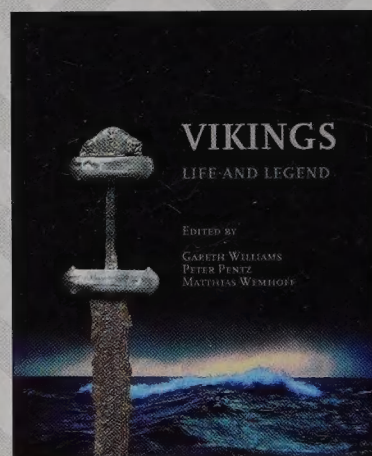
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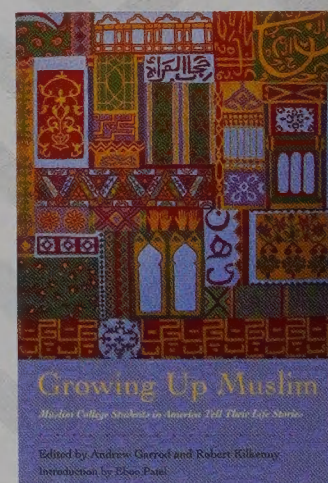
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